

# Pragmatic Transfer by Japanese EFL Learners when Asking for Personal Information

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Japanese EFL learners were investigated in terms of linguistic behaviour when *asking for personal information*. It was hypothesized that they would transfer their first language practice of seeking personal information early in a conversation. Also it seemed probable that they would exhibit different topic sensitivity from the native speaker control group. Their responses to a Discourse Completion Task were contrasted with strategies used by the control group. The non-native speakers were more likely to ask *direct questions*, and did not use the option of *not asking*. But they also employed politeness forms in deference to the interlocutor, which were not used by the native speakers. The Japanese learners appeared less concerned with asking someone's *age* than their *marital status*, while the questions were treated similarly by the native speaker group. The most probable explanation for these differences in linguistic behaviour is transfer of first language cultural patterns. Transfer errors could be reduced through specific classroom instruction.

"It is safe to say that the more dissimilar two cultures are, the more learners will need to make use of speech acts that appear in one speech

community but not in the other" (Odlin 1989: 55).

## 1. Introduction

This research project investigates potential sources of pragmatic failure by Japanese EFL learners. Instances of pragmatic failure can be explained in terms of four probable sources: *transfer*, *lack of proficiency*, *speech accommodation*, and *teaching-induced errors*. Consequently, it would seem that explicit socio-pragmatic instruction should be provided to students in areas including: the social norms of English-speaking cultures, possible misunderstandings caused by not conforming to social norms, the validity of choice of whether to conform or not and awareness of possible limitations of pragmatic competence.

A group of Japanese EFL learners was investigated in terms of linguistic behaviour when *asking for personal information* in the foreign language. In Japanese cultural interactions, it is necessary to learn personal details about interlocutors early in a conversation, so that correct forms of address can be used, and proper attention paid to social status. This cultural norm operates at a level of linguistic necessity, since relative status differences between two interlocutors needs to be formalized in linguistic terms of address and politeness. In this study, it is consequently hypothesized that non-native speakers (NNS) will transfer this practice into English language use. So it is expected that Japanese interlocutors may press for certain personal details early in a conversation, as is their custom in Japanese social interactions. However certain types of personal information are considered to be private in nature in western cultural settings, and the NNS' intentions could consequently be misrepresented in a western context.

## 2. Methodology

A *Discourse Completion Task* (DCT) containing thirty questions was given to twelve native Japanese residing in Japan, and also to three English native speakers (NS) as a control group. The questionnaire was provided in Japanese to the NNS, and in English to the NS, and both groups were asked to respond with what they would probably say (in English) for each defined situation. Two questions on the DCT specifically investigated the situation of *asking for personal information* in a work context. Both study groups were invited to provide additional comments (in their native language) to explain various responses, as necessary. The DCT utilized an *open-ended* response format, which was considered preferable to a *multiple-choice* format, since the latter could prejudice answers by suggesting possible responses. The Japanese group were at an upper-intermediate proficiency level, and were expected to have no trouble producing the types of linguistic response being called for in the various situations. The DCT questions relevant to the current study are included in the Appendix, along with both the NNS and NS responses.

*Advantages of the DCT*: one of the advantages of the DCT is its usefulness for "studying the stereotypical, perceived requirements for a socially appropriate (though not always polite) response" (Kasper & Dahl 1991: 242). The situations examined in this study establish a perceived requirement for appropriate social behaviour, so the use of a DCT appears suitable. Discourse comprised largely of *novel utterances* would best be analyzed as a natural language form, but given the situational requirements established in this survey, it is reasonable to assume that appropriate responses could be effectively elicited by means of a DCT. Hill, Ide,

Ikuta, Kawasaki & Ogino (1986) argue that a DCT can provide better examples of speech for analysis than natural discourse samples because a DCT elicits a prototypical response, in contrast to natural data in which atypical responses frequently occur. The DCT is probably best suited to NNS because of the relatively conscious process of speaking a second language. NNS are arguably more aware than NS of the linguistic choices they make and are thus more likely to be able to explicitly state their choices. DCTs are also particularly useful for “gaining insight into social and psychological factors that are likely to affect speech and performance”, and for “ascertaining the canonical shape” of various speech acts in the minds of speakers of different languages (Kasper & Dahl 1991 : 242). So it would appear that the choice of a DCT instrument would be beneficial to the current study.

*Limitations of the DCT* : DCTs may fail to elicit natural forms of *novel utterance* because the deliberate reflection which usually accompanies the response establishes a type of predetermined answer. Hence there are many ways in which responses may differ from natural discourse : “They do not adequately show the depth of emotion, the amount of repetition, or the degree of elaboration” (Beebe & Takahashi 1989 : 120). Other ways in which the DCT may be unrepresentative of natural discourse include shorter responses caused by the written task format, and inaccurate representation of spontaneous responses on account of the lack of direct personal interaction and negotiation (Kasper & Dahl 1991 : 242). Hence the DCT methodology may be somewhat limited as a tool for eliciting data relating to *Asking for Personal Information* type situations. The DCT may also be limited in its scope for accurately eliciting the responses of native controls. Harlow describes the “limitations on native introspection” given that

"sociolinguistic rules are often found below the level of conscious awareness" (1990: 139). Hence when answering the DCT, NS may provide responses which may in fact not typically occur in natural discourse situations.

### 3. Research Theory

Instances of pragmatic failure by NNS can be explained in terms of four potential sources: *transfer*, *lack of proficiency*, *speech accommodation*, and *teaching-induced errors*. *Transfer* is defined as occurring when NNS attempt to use first language (L1) behavioural patterns in the second language (L2). Depending on cultural differences between the two cultures, this strategy may be successful in various situations, but may also be a frequent cause of linguistic error. *Lack of proficiency* may contribute to linguistic misunderstandings, particularly when NNS are unable to appropriately express their intended meanings, either through a lack of requisite linguistic resources, or through over-generalization of previously learnt target language forms. *Speech accommodation* is also suggested as an important source of pragmatic failure, where NNS may deliberately attempt to either converge or diverge from foreign cultural behaviour. In such cases, linguistic failures can be attributed to intentional behaviour on the part of the NNS, although what was effectively communicated to the NS may also be uncertain. *Teaching-induced errors* are another potential area of difficulty. Classroom learning usually does not include explicit pragmatic instruction, but tends to concentrate instead on teaching types of linguistic routine, formulae, and vocabulary, for which precise translations are given. And although forms of cultural behaviour may be important to

the context of communication processes, learners are frequently not taught about cultural behaviour. Consequently, EFL learners may not be appropriately equipped for intercultural interactions, and may behave in ways that NS either misjudge or cannot interpret clearly.

The current study investigates, in particular, potential sources of *transfer*, which have been alternatively defined as *discourse accent* by Scarcella: "I define discourse accent as the use of conversational features in one's second language in the same way in which they are used in the first language" (1983: 306). Scarcella's study of the discourse accent of speakers of L1 Spanish on L2 English indicated a lack of transfer on personal topics such as *family* and *age*. Despite the more frequent occurrence of these topics in Spanish, this linguistic behaviour was not transferred into English. Scarcella attributed this result to an awareness of cultural differences on the part of the learners. Some differences were evident, including in the timing of when the topic of *family* was introduced into a conversation. Native English speakers tended to introduce this topic (if at all) at a much later stage in the conversation. Scarcella's study clearly indicated that the *topics* of a conversation, the *frequency of occurrence* of the topics, and the *sequencing* of the topics are not universal across languages and cultures.

For the native English speaker, asking for personal information such as one's *age* or *marital status* may constitute "unacceptable topic nomination" (Riley 1989: 239). Thomas (1983) also alludes to cross-cultural differences affecting the judgment of what constitutes a face-threatening act. In the present study it is hypothesized that *asking for personal information* would be considered an imposition in English-speaking societies but not in Japan, and that this difference would be a source of pragmatic failure.

Loveday observes: "In the Japanese speech community the establishment of identity and status is a fundamental prerequisite to a considerable portion of interaction. Prolonged anonymous exchanges are difficult to maintain" (1983: 178). Given the sociolinguistic imperative of ascertaining the interlocutor's identity in Japanese, it is hypothesized that this tendency to solicit the necessary personal information would be transferred by speakers of L1 Japanese into L2 English. Loveday (1983) notes the offence typically taken by L1 English speakers when asked questions perceived as unnecessarily probing because they are asked too early in a conversation. Riley (1989) cites the case of a Japanese professor asking the age of his British counterpart immediately after being introduced. These would be errors of *inappropriate sequencing*, as identified in Scarcella (1983).

Matsumoto (1988) also refers to the perceived need of the Japanese to ascertain the identity of their interlocutors, and describes their tendency to introduce themselves in terms of the group or company they belong to, in contrast to the Western habit of soliciting one's occupation. On account of this practice, NS may regard the NNS as interacting on an official or professional basis, which would be appropriate for business meetings, but quite inappropriate for social meetings. In social settings, such behaviour would appear as overly formal, particularly since the NNS may continue to press for occupational information until this is learnt. Such types of pragmatic error may be attributed to culturally-based behavioural patterns, which are linguistically necessary in L1, but not relevant in L2 practice.

#### **4. Discussion of Results**

Responses obtained from the DCT are listed in the Appendix. They

were classified according to the type of strategy employed in reaction to each situation. Four types of strategy were evident: *direct question*, *hinting strategy*, *asking a third party*, or *not asking*. The strategy employed in each case was regarded as indicative of the perceived requirements and social norms defined by the situation. Question 7 asked subjects what they would say when they wished to know the *marital status* of a new worker in their office. In western cultures, *marital status* is generally regarded as personal information, rather than a topic suitable for discussion between strangers in a work environment. So it was hypothesized that Japanese EFL learners would be more likely to seek this information than the NS control group, who might instead refrain from asking this question. The numbers of each strategy employed by the two groups is summarized as follows:

NNS: *Direct Questions*: 8; *Hinting strategy*: 1;

*Asking a third party*: 3; *Not asking*: 0.

NS: *Direct Questions*: 2; *Hinting strategy*: 1;

*Asking a third party*: 1; *Not asking*: 1.

Indeed it does appear from this data that the NNS group are much more likely to ask a direct question in this situation, although a few NNS responded with the indirect strategies of *hinting* or *asking a third party*. But while the NNS group used substantially more *direct questions* than other strategies, the NS control group appear likely to employ any of the four strategies on an equal basis. The NNS group also showed a second preference for the strategy of *asking a third party*, a pattern which was not evident in the NS results. Furthermore, no NNS employed the strategy of *not asking*, while this strategy seems equally likely to be employed by the NS group. So the types of response apparent in the data appear to be



distributed differently between the groups.

It is also interesting to study the data in terms of politeness strategies employed by the two groups. While the NNS were much more likely to ask a *direct question*, their responses clearly indicate an awareness of the potentially face-threatening nature of the questions being asked. There is frequent usage of grammatical modality on the part of the NNS group: "may I ask... (2), do you mind..., can I ask... (2), would you mind if...". One subject even excused herself: "pardon my manner...". As many as seven of the twelve responses exhibit what can be regarded as *negative politeness* forms, which permit the addressee to "maintain claims of territory and self-determination" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 70), and allow for an easy escape from the question (Tanaka & Kawade 1982). Although the NS control group tended to use alternative strategies to save the potential embarrassment that could be caused by this question, their responses do not indicate a concern with expressing politeness. So the more frequent use of *direct questions* by the NNS also coincided with greater attention to polite and deferential behaviour than was exhibited by the NS control group.

Question 8 investigated what subjects would say when they were curious about a co-worker's *age*. It was assumed that this would be another topic that NS were likely to treat as private information to the individual concerned. The summary of the numbers of strategies employed by each group is as follows:

NNS: *Direct Questions*: 10; *Hinting strategy*: 1;

*Asking a third party*: 1; *Not asking*: 0.

NS: *Direct Questions*: 1; *Hinting strategy*: 1;

*Asking a third party*: 0; *Not asking*: 1.

There is once again a pattern of the NNS group being more likely to

respond to the situation with a *direct question*, which is their clearly favoured response to this situation. Indeed the NNS appear to be quite unreserved about asking someone's *age*, whereas some concern was evident when inquiring about *marital status*. Once again, the NS group were distributed equally between the four strategies, indicating no particular preference for one strategy over another. And once again the option of *not asking* is seen as a valid response to the situation by the NS group, but not by the NNS group. Also of significance is the repeated pattern of politeness evident in the NNS responses, with frequent usage of modality: "may I ask..., do you mind..., could I know..., would you mind... (2), can I ask..., would you tell me..., if you don't mind...". As many as eight of the twelve NNS responses contain politeness forms, and it appears once again that the NS group were more likely to resort to using an alternative strategy, rather than employing a direct question with grammatical modality. One NS response utilized a politeness form: "if you don't mind me asking...".

## 5. Conclusions

Some patterns are evident in the data from this research study. When *asking for personal information*, Japanese EFL learners are more likely than NS to ask *direct questions*. They are also unlikely to choose the option of *not asking*, which was regarded as a valid response by the NS group. The NNS group used indirect strategies on some occasions, and there appears to be some favour for the strategy of *asking a third party*. But while the Japanese group were much more likely to ask *direct questions* to glean personal information, they were also likely to soften this strategy

by employing politeness forms in deference to the interlocutor. In contrast, NS rarely used politeness forms, but were likely to resort to alternative strategies rather than *direct questions*. Other strategies employed by NS were: *hinting*, *not asking*, and *asking a third party*. The last of these options, *asking a third party*, was more likely to be employed by the NNS group than by the NS group. The NNS group also appear to be less concerned about asking someone's *age* than their *marital status*, while these questions were regarded as similarly personal by the control group.

Personal topics, such as *marital status* or *age*, tend to be treated with a type of taboo status in western cultures. So that frequent use of *direct questions* by Japanese EFL learners when *asking for personal information* (as demonstrated in this study) may result in native English speakers interpreting the Japanese behaviour as somewhat impolite. And although such interpretations may appear unfair to the Japanese speakers (who are behaving in an appropriate manner according to their native social norms), such linguistic errors would appear to be valid examples of L2 pragmatic failure. Also, they are most likely to be on account of *transfer*, since there is clear evidence of incompatible linguistic behaviour between the L1 and L2, and the other potential sources of pragmatic failure do not appear to be significant to this investigation. There is no evidence that *lack of proficiency* has affected the intentions or communication process of the NNS, although it is possible that *speech accommodation* could be a relevant factor in this study. If NNS deliberately employed the Japanese strategy of asking *direct questions*, although they knew this was not an appropriate practice in the foreign culture, then *speech accommodation* theory would provide the most likely explanation. However, there is no evidence of deliberate transgression of English social norms, in fact in subsequent

informal discussions it appeared probable that the NNS subjects were unaware of the specific differences in social behaviour targeted by the questions. And finally, it is also unlikely that classroom practice could account for these differences of cultural behaviour, so it is suggested that *teaching-induced errors* are of less significance than *transfer*, as was also argued in Takahashi (1996). Hence the most likely explanation for these pragmatic failures is *transfer*, as was contended earlier in the study.

It is also important to comment that these types of pragmatic failure by EFL learners are largely avoidable. It is suggested that language teaching professionals have the duty of "sensitizing learners to expect cross-cultural differences" (Thomas 1983 : 110). Japanese EFL learners should be specifically taught : that in western cultures it is socially inappropriate to ask someone's age shortly after being introduced, that this question is generally used between friends, rather than acquaintances, that this question does not commonly occur in a workplace environment, and finally, that this question rarely occurs during introductory meetings. In fact, English language social norms require a certain level of intimacy between interlocutors for this question to be acceptable. With the benefit of specific classroom instruction, it seems unlikely that Japanese EFL learners would continue making this type of pragmatic error.

### Appendix

The following is a list of the NNS responses to the questions, and the NS responses for purposes of comparison. Responses have been classified according to the type of strategy employed, whether *direct question*, *hinting strategy*, *asking a third party*, or *not asking*.

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Please respond to the following questions in English. If you would say nothing at all in response to a particular item, please say so. If you would respond non-verbally, please indicate how you would respond.

7. What do you say when you are curious to know the marital status of a new worker in your office?

NNS Responses (*direct question*):

- (1) "May I ask if you've got married or not?"
- (2) "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question? Are you married?"
- (3) "Would you mind if I ask your marriage status?"
- (4) "Can I ask you are single or married?"
- (5) "May I ask if you are married?"
- (6) "Are you married?"
- (7) "Are you single?"
- (8) "Do you marry?"

NNS Responses (*hinting strategy*):

- (1) "Can I ask you about your family?"

NNS Responses (*asking a third party*):

- (1) "Pardon my manner, but I'd like to know weather she's married or not?"
- (2) "Does he or she get married?"
- (3) "I hear the other one, "Do you know he is married or not~."

NS Responses:

- (1) Nothing (*not asking*); or — Ask another person (*asking a third party*); or —

- "Are you married?" (*direct question*).  
 (2) "Are you married?" (*direct question*).  
 (3) "Do you live alone?" (*hinting strategy*).

NNS Totals: *Direct Questions*: 8; *Hinting strategy*: 1; *Asking a third party*: 3; *Not asking*: 0.

NS Totals: *Direct Questions*: 2; *Hinting strategy*: 1; *Asking a third party*: 1; *Not asking*: 1.

8. What do you say when you are curious to know the age of a new employee who will be working beside you in your office?

NNS Responses (*direct question*):

- (1) "May I ask how old you are?"
- (2) "Do you mind if I ask your age?"
- (3) "Could I know how old you are?"
- (4) "Would you mind my asking how old you are?"
- (5) "Would you mind if I ask your age?"
- (6) "Can I ask your age?"
- (7) "Would you tell me your age if you don't mind?"
- (8) "How old are you?" ( $\times 3$ ).

NNS Responses (*hinting strategy*):

- (1) "Who is the same age as you in this place?" (I would then guess).

NNS Responses (*asking a third party*):

- (1) "If you don't mind, could you teach me how old he or she is, who has joined us recently?"

NS Responses:

- (1) Don't ask (*not asking*).
- (2) "If you don't mind me asking — How old are you?" (*direct question*).
- (3) "How long (How many years) have you been working?" (*hinting strategy*).

NNS Totals: *Direct Questions*: 10; *Hinting strategy*: 1; *Asking a third party*: 1; *Not asking*: 0.

NS Totals: *Direct Questions*: 1; *Hinting strategy*: 1; *Asking a third party*: 0; *Not asking*: 1.

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