

Intercultural communication by non-native and native speakers of Japanese in text-based synchronous CMC

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This study explores speech behaviour when non-native speakers of Japanese (NNSJ) and native speakers of Japanese (NSJ) exchange cultural information, specifically using text-based synchronous computer-mediated communication. This experimental study uses a scaffolding technique in which a Japanese language teacher is less present and NNSJ are left to communicate with NSJ within a restricted timeframe. This study demands their intercultural engagement, thus suggesting an outcome of intercultural relationship building. While the study examined participants' speech behaviours – specifically, the key speech act of requesting – observed to be important for realising smooth intercultural relationships, it also highlighted attributes of available technologies useful in facilitating intercultural engagement.

Since people from different cultural backgrounds have different perceptions of politeness reflected in their behaviour and language use, understanding how request strategies are used by NSJ could give NNSJ intercultural insights and skills in Japanese language and socio-cultural behaviour. CMC has been utilised in computer-assisted language learning (CALL), with students able to learn languages through a real-world context and access native speakers of the target language, beyond the classroom. CMC has been found to be an effective adopted 'third place' (Kramsch 1993) located at the intersection of the cultures the learner grew up with, and the cultures to which they are introduced. In the case of language use, technology allows NNSJ to record their conversations, and reflect on the language being used, thus gaining intercultural insights and skills; these could be transferable to other communication modes, whether computer-driven technology or face-to-face. It is intended that the findings of this study might shed light on the innovative enhancement of non-native Japanese speakers' intercultural and socio-cultural competence through the use of text-based CMC.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, Japanese, politeness, inter-cultural communication

Introduction

This study explores virtual speech behaviours in Japanese language networked class activities to observe non-native speakers of Japanese (NNSJ) and native speakers of Japanese (NSJ) exchanging cultural information, specifically using text-based synchronous computer-mediated communication. This experimental study uses a 'scaffolding' technique (Bruner 1985, Clay & Cazden 1990) in which a Japanese language teacher is less present and NNSJ are left to communicate with NSJ within a restricted timeframe. Therefore the process of this study demands their intercultural engagement, thus suggesting an outcome of intercultural relationship building.

The theoretical framework of scaffolding originates from Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which Vygotsky (1978) theorised that human learning and development are closely related to purposeful activity, especially using language as a tool that reflects human thoughts. Furthermore ZPD has been proved to be an effective framework in the area of collaborative language learning (Debski & Gruba 1998, Ohta 2000). Based on this theoretical framework, the present study observed participants' speech behaviours – specifically, the key speech act of requesting – as they communicated about a topic that the researcher deemed was purposeful or authentic to both groups.

Since people from different cultural backgrounds have different perceptions of politeness reflected in their behaviour and also in their language use, understanding how request strategies are used by NSJ could give NNSJ insights into socio-cultural behaviour in Japanese text-based CMC. By their very nature, requests are face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson 1987): that is, potentially threatening both for the

requesters, who may feel uncomfortable imposing their wants on others, and for the recipients, who may not wish to be imposed upon. In order to be an effective communicator in everyday life, a person must obtain an appropriate linguistic and pragmatic knowledge, including use of request strategies, so as not to offend others thus minimising the degree of face threat to both parties.

Significance of CMC

It is well-known that Internet chat users have created hybrid communication or 'netspeak', somewhere between spoken and written speech (Cameron 2001, Elmer-Dewitt in Crystal 2001). Studies of this phenomenon have mainly focused on English 'netspeakers'. However, in Japan, many types of virtual communication and virtual culture have been devised since the Internet was introduced (Rheingold 1993). Accepted cultural norms in CMC affect the written or verbal texts and generate their style of communication; Halliday 1978 observes that text is language operative in contexts which consist of the range of texts produced in a community. Thus, the texts generated by the participants in CMC would be culturally specific.

CMC has been utilised in computer-assisted language learning (CALL), with students able to learn languages through a real-world context and to access native speakers' language in the target country beyond the classroom. CMC not only has the advantage of providing the opportunity to expose NNSJ to more interaction in the target language environment for students than a conventional classroom approach, but furthermore allows them to 'freeze' or record their conversations, and reflect on the language being used. It has been incorporated into language-learning pedagogy (Beauvois 1992, Goodfellow & Lamy 1999, Kern & Warschauer 2000, Kitade 2000, Chapelle 2004) and the framework for intercultural communication mediated by the Internet has been rapidly developed (Thorne 2003). CMC also has been found to be an effective 'third place' (Kramsch 1993) located at the intersection of the cultures the learner grew up with and the cultures they are introduced to. It is my view that this third place is a space where learners can intersect with socio-pragmatic knowledge of a target language: the use of language specifically in CMC culture. Schwienhorst 1998 also supports the view that virtual communication "allows for the integration of language learning tools and resources in a common environment".

The pedagogy of Japanese language learning is not discussed in this current study, which rather focuses on observing how the two parties (NSJ and NNSJ) interculturally interact with each other using requests in the online environment. Understanding and acquiring request strategies could give NNSJ socio-cultural/intercultural insights and skills applicable not only to CMC but also to other media of Japanese language conversation.

Two aspects observed

Depending on what sort of artifacts and context of conversation are being observed, there are numerous aspects to look at in synchronous CMC. This study focuses on two:

- Ways in which NSJ and NNSJ exchange information
- The language behaviour in requests used by NSJ and NNSJ

Methodology

Data collection

The researcher, a Japanese language teacher, investigated the use of synchronous CMC interaction through a task which required four NNSJ students to request cultural information from four NSJ students, creating a discourse between NSJ and NNSJ in which they gave spontaneous responses within guidelines. Participants were not anonymous but NNSJ university students in Australia and NSJ students from a partner university in Japan. They knew each other by the time they participated in the virtual conversation, and used their real names. This gave them more real context than that which often occurs in Internet chat, with anonymous participants whose gender, age or other attributes are non-identifiable, making it difficult to analyse their socio-cultural use of language.

MSN Microsoft chat software is freely available and well known among students, so this freeware was used for their communication method. In order to facilitate the observation of their own speech behaviour, and of course analysis by the researcher, the text of whole conversations was recorded using a text recording function in Microsoft Messenger software.

Open-ended role plays were used, which gave the participants more options of their discourse content than restricted discourse completion tasks, or memorisation of lines in role plays, would give. Another advantage of open-ended chat was to provide more natural and coherent conversations in which NSJ and NNSJ perceived a social sense of the context. The teacher envisaged that the scaffolding technique would facilitate better flow of conversation – unlike the previous studies (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989) which were mainly focused on linguistic realisation of speech acts.

All NNSJ-NSJ pairs used the same situation/context for the open-ended role play, to allow clearer comparison of data. The situation/context was determined after considerable investigation of existing community sites in MSN, Yahoo and blogs where NNSJ are exchanging their information on Japan and its culture, therefore it is suitable for this study. One of the scenarios is as follows:

You are going to Japan (Australia) and would like to book accommodation, but they would not accept a credit card payment. Ask the requestee if they would pay your deposit to a Japanese inn (Australian bed & breakfast).

Since a small number of participants was involved in this study, a baseline of pairs of NSJ was not sufficient to compare with that of NNSJ. However, each participant was provided with a transcript of their chat, and interviews were held by phone or e-mail to find out about their perceptions of the chat and their self-reports on the language choices they made.

Results

The data revealed some interesting differences in speech behaviour between NSJ and NNSJ, as well as some innovative strategies for dealing with difficulties in communication. In the following chat segments, NSJ is firstly asking for any places to stay and in the end asking NNSJ to pay the deposit for him/her.

Sample section of chat log: NSJ A (requester) and NNSJ B (requestee) in CMC

3	NSJ A:	おすすめのばしょはありますか？ Do you recommend any place?	ReqHD
4	NNSJ B:	えと。。。ちょっとまってください :) Let me see, please hang on a second) (Excite web dictionary and links were used)	
15	NNSJ B:	はい (Yes)	
16	NNSJ B:	おもしろい場所はメルボルンセントラルです。この場所を大きな時計あります (An interesting place is the Melbourne Central where there is a big clock)	
17	NSJ A:	大きな時計ですか？見てみたいです。(A big clock? I'd like to see it)	
18	NNSJ B:	私の悪いの日本語はわかりましたか 这里是。 (Do you understand my bad Japanese? Here is the link) http://international.visitmelbourne.com/langs/index.cfm?lang=9	
19	NNSJ B:	: P	
20	NSJ A:	そのほかにおすすめのばしょはありますか？ (Do you recommend any other places?)	ReqHD
24	NSJ A:	そうですねー。メルボルンのホテルは安いですか？ (I see, are the hotels in Melbourne cheap?)	Hint
25	NNSJ B:	いいえ、ちがうです。メルボルンのホテルは高いです。 でもメルボルンのバックパカのホテルは安いですんでいます。毎日 \$ 5 0。 これです。 (No, they're not. They are expensive, but there is a cheap backpackers hotel, \$50 per day. This is it) http://www.friendlygroup.com.au/home.asp	
30	NSJ A:	Would you make a reservation?	ReqHD
31	NNSJ B:	Whoops!	
32	NNSJ B:	: P	
33	NNSJ B:	ええ。それはわたしはしていません。いまだです。 (Well, I'm not doing it now)	
34	NSJ A:	“よやくきん”をわたしのかわりにはらってくれますか？ (Could you please pay the deposit for me?)	ReqHD
35	NSJ A:	あとでおかねはわたします。 (I will give you some money later)	PosSM

As shown in the above sample segment of a chat log, the study finds that in making requests, NSJ tended to use 'preposed supportive moves' (coded as PreSM: an explanation or account), and/or used 'hints' before they requested, followed by 'postposed supportive moves' (PosSM: offer of responsibility/repayment). However, NNSJ when asked to make a booking tended to refuse NSJ's requests for payment of deposit. NNSJ made no postposed supportive moves (PosSM); instead they used 'speaker-dominant request' (ReqSD: "May I...?") and 'thanking'. In Japanese, it is considered polite to precede a request with PreSM and Hints as mitigation, especially in a heavily indebted situation, such as paying a deposit. On the contrary, NNSJ do not use a similar speech behaviour to that of NSJ. According to an interview with NSJ, the NNSJ was still considered an outsider and/or a learner who possessed foreignness thus NSJ would not expect NNSJ to use native-like speech behaviour; an abrupt remark or even deviation of their norms in their speech behaviour was accepted due to the NNSJ's foreignness.

When NSJ comes to difficulties in understanding NNSJ's intention, using English as a last resort was evident where they wanted to avoid a miscommunication. When some NNSJ had difficulties in understanding NSJs' expressions, they actually looked up web-based translation sites while they were chatting and worked out the meanings of NSJs' wordings (line 4). Also, one NNSJ helped NSJ to provide his target tourist information by including web addresses (URLs) in his response (line 18 and 25) so that NSJ was able to look it up later. Moreover, in virtual text communication, where the tone of voice or facial expression are absent, both types of students were careful in the way they used emoticons such as :) (line 4) and : P (lines 19 and 32) when they felt especially awkward or face-threatened – such as when the task required them to ask or be asked about payment.

Conclusion

This was a study in an interactive environment in CMC where the participants were scaffolded towards the realisation of intercultural knowledge and practices of the real world. This preliminary study has revealed some insightful phenomena in this networked interaction, using features of the Internet that have potential both to support learning and intercultural communication among NSJ and NNSJ. The students themselves initiate their own ways of communication: integrating hyperlinks which are commonly used in the Internet, such as online dictionary, translation, tourist information pages, and using emoticons, even switching to the other's language where they felt this necessary. It was found in this instance that especially NNSJ have knowledge of the Internet and select appropriate software or hyperlinks to support their communication with NSJ; the researcher himself did not envisage this outcome from this experiment with the scaffolding technique in teaching.

The teacher usually has a knowledge of the affordances of software/technology (Day & Lloyd, 2007) and selects them for the students to achieve the best learning outcomes. On the contrary, this scaffolding technique tends to reverse the student and teacher roles, as it gives students opportunity to actively construct the useful attributes of software on their monitor screens in order to support smooth communication with their counterparts. One example was the speech behaviour produced by some NNSJs who found what they thought were grammatically correct words or expressions in an online dictionary and/or translation and copied and pasted these onto the actual chat, however the translation was pragmatically incorrect. And once NSJs had acknowledged and tolerated NNSJs' language competence level, intercultural miscommunication might not remain a real issue between them.

Another factor is that the shareware software (MSN Messenger) the class used is accessible and user-friendly, which satisfied the purpose of the scaffolding technique: to allow students to communicate independently of the teacher. It also enabled simultaneous interactivity and freezing/recording their CMC, to allow them to reflect on the language being used. In summary, it certainly provided the opportunity to expose NNSJ and NSJ to interact and learn from each other. It resulted more interaction in the target language environment for students than a conventional classroom approach would.

In conclusion, was this a success? Have the students learnt any intercultural aspects while they were interacting? This networked class might give us a hint for opening up more innovative teaching and learning opportunities. It seems to be clear that raising the level of awareness of their similarities and differences in request strategies could help understanding between the two cultures. This study is a preliminary one and does not permit generalisation regarding the speech behaviour in CMC produced by both types of subjects. It is envisaged that further investigation of virtual speech behaviour with more data on NSJ would be collected, compared and analysed with NNSJ.

Another aspect that needs to be considered in synchronous text-based CMC is speed of typing – requiring further investigation into whether the individuals' typing skills affected their way of communication; as some NNJS apologised for their slowness in typing in Japanese.

It is intended that the findings of this research might suggest how CMC can be implemented in language and culture learning and, over time, improve NNSJs' socio-cultural and intercultural competence beyond the classroom. Perhaps when investigating the effect of CMC on language learning, we need to consider the aspect of multiple perspectives (Egbert 2005) of CALL in CMC with much larger data in a longitudinal study.

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