**Online Self-Introductions by Learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language**

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# Abstract

In this project, foreign language learners of Japanese and English interacted online through self-introductions. We observed how learners of Japanese introduced themselves, their intentions, how they realized these, how the messages were received, and the skills needed to communicate effectively. Video and survey data were collected, including learners’ self-evaluations, and interviews were conducted to assess the interactions. The most successful examples were identified and effective skills were extrapolated. The results showed discrepancies between learners’ self-evaluations and the opinions of the addressees. It was evident that non-verbal communication strategies were important. Pedagogical implications were explored and alternative approaches suggested.

***Keywords*:** learners of Japanese as a foreign language, online self-introductions, self-evaluation, communication skills

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# Introduction

Language education should respond to individual needs, but many language lessons focus on providing learners with templates. For example, there are sets of self-introduction patterns that learners fill in to “create” self-introductions. However, this activity is mechanistic and not a creative endeavor. Learners who want to express their personalities are limited by those prototypes and cannot effectively convey their individuality.

In the present study, the researchers interrogate the current language-learning environment and motivate for a syllabus that reflects individual needs, in preference to the conventional functional syllabus, or the situational (*bamen*) syllabus (Kobayashi, 2005, 2016; Sato et. al., 2015). We focus on the self-introductions of Japanese Foreign Language (JFL)learners—what they aim to convey, how they realize these intentions, and the skills they need to effectively communicate with the addressees.

# Literature Review

Existing research has focused on the assessment of the linguistic performance of language learners, and found that evaluations depend on the evaluator. This applies to the evaluation of JFL learners’ writing (Usami et al., 2009), speech performance (Ishihara et al., 2011; Saito & Akiyama, 2017; Tsurutani, 2010), and conversation (Choi, 2008, 2013; Morimoto et al., 2013; Nohara, 2009, 2011; Watanabe 2005a, 2005b).

For example, Tsurutani’s study (2010) indicates that native Japanese college students—who did not have any contact with the non-Japanese—judged the pronunciation of L2 Japanese learners based on the accuracy of timing rather than pitch accent (Tsurutani, 2010). A further study examined four groups of evaluators: teachers (Japanese language; non-language) and JFL learners (beginner; and advanced), to see how they assessed the speech of JFL learners (pitch and timing in sentences). The results showed that Japanese language teachers are stricter in their judgments than non-teachers, and advanced learners are stricter than beginner-level learners (Ishihara et al., 2011).

Watanabe (2005a) studied how native speakers who are also Japanese language teachers (n = 25) or college students (n = 25) evaluate JFL learner conversations with Japanese college students, to establish criteria for assessment. The results showed that Japanese teachers tend to negatively evaluate sociolinguistic competence (such as failure to use honorifics), but Japanese college students, give positive evaluations for the same. Watanabe (2005a) also showed that both teachers and students evaluate grammar and pronunciation errors negatively. On the other hand, vocabulary and expressions such as *wakamonokotoba* (youth slang), discourse and communication competence—such as non-verbal communication, using gestures and fillers—were positively evaluated. Nohara’s (2011) study also found that Japanese language teachers focus on linguistic performance, but non-teachers tend to focus on the speakers’ attitude. Other studies (e.g., Choi 2008, 2013) also examined Japanese teacher and non-teacher evaluations of JFL conversations and found that non-verbal communication strategies such as paralinguistic competence, are evaluated positively by both groups.

Iwasaki (2013) investigated the use of hedges such as *nanka* or *chotto* by JFL learners (n = 5) and examined how Japanese college students (n 60), feel about their sociability. JFL learners’ discourses were recorded before and after study abroad. The frequency of hedges, and raters’ evaluations were compared. The results demonstrated that, after studying abroad, the use of hedges by JFL learners increased significantly, as did the ratings by college students. Iwasaki claims that JFL learners who frequently use hedges are able “to socially package their messages effectively” (Iwasaki, 2013, p. 263) as well as “project their identity as young adults” (Iwasaki, 2013, p. 263). Although Iwasaki concentrated on JFL learners rather than raters, her data provide insights into the judgments of a specific rater demographic.

Few extant studies focus on the intentions of the learners. A notable exception is Siegal’s (1994, 1995, 1996) study of four adult women learning Japanese in Japan. This ethnographic research focused on language use associated with the image JFL learners wanted to present. The JFL learners were aware of the different speech styles associated with expressing politeness. One of the participants, Mary, thought that she could not express certain “subtleties” as she could in English. In cases of learners wanting to express deference or politeness, this gap seems larger for adult learners. However, interlocutors did not necessarily view pragmatic inappropriateness as a failure (Siegal, 1995, 1996).

There is a current trend in language education to depart from teaching methodologies that focus on standardized content (Kobayashi, 2005, 2016; Sato et. al., 2015). Noda (2005), for instance, argues that it is time to shift the focus from teaching sets of grammatical structures to developing skills suited to individual needs. Kobayashi (2005) supports this, maintaining that “beginner” Japanese grammar does not include the learner’s perspective.

To excavate this, we focused on the intentions of JFL learners and how they realized these through their self-introductions. We also analyzed how learners introduced themselves and the skills they needed to effectively communicate with the addressees

# Method

## Project Overview

The project comprised exchanges between JFL and English Foreign Language (EFL) learners at universities in the U.S. and Japan, between September–December 2016. The purpose was to encourage students to explore voluntary, self-directed learning, and use the target language in practical and personal ways. The project comprised a series of tasks involving video and written exchanges via private Japanese and English Facebook group pages, created by the instructors. On the Japanese page, JFL learners posted their videos in Japanese, and native Japanese college students (EFL learners) posted their comments. Conversely, on the English page, EFL learners posted their videos in English and American college students (JFL learners) responded. In these assignments, students introduced themselves, talked about their campus, and explained their favorite activities.

The participants in this study were 66 JFL and 51 EFL learners from the exchange project. The JFL learners were enrolled in third- and fifth-semester Japanese courses in the U.S. and their Japanese proficiency level was novice-high to intermediate-high. The EFL learners were enrolled in a Basic English course at a science and engineering university in Japan.

### *Questionnaire*

We conducted surveys of JFL learners, with questions tailored to their video self-introductions (Appendix A). The questions were as follows: 1) How would you describe yourself? Write the keywords that express how you see yourself; 2) Do you think that you were able to realize your intentions in your Facebook video? If yes, what kind of things did you try, or how did you express yourself? If no, why do you think that you could not show who you are? What was difficult? The questionnaire was administered in English and all questionnaire data were collected and used to create a self-description sheet.

### *Self-introduction videos*

The self-introduction videos were collected from Facebook. There were three JFL classes and three EFL classes, allowing for a one-to-one class pairing. All the students created videos to introduce themselves to their counterparts at the beginning of the project. However, the EFL deadline was scheduled earlier than the JFL date, which allowed the JFL learners to see their counterparts’ videos and gain a sense of the audience for their self-introductions.

## Data collection procedure

After the questionnaire data were collected, we selected JFL learners who had provided detailed answers to Question 1). Among those, six answered “yes” and seven answered “no” to Question 2). We created a list of self-descriptions for the 13 learners based on Question 1). We collected the self-introduction videos of these learners from Facebook and created a single 11.5 minute video of six patterns from the introductions. To avoid showing the same order, we shuffled the patterns to create a variety of self-introductions. Additionally, we gathered questionnaire data from the thirteen JFL learner self-descriptions in English. Following Morimoto et al. (2013), all descriptive words were listed and translated into Japanese. During this process, redundant descriptive words were eliminated, and similar words were merged. For example, the words “talkative” and “verbose” were merged into the Japanese word *oshaberina*. The list consisted of 36 Japanese words and was used by the Japanese students when they reviewed the JFL learners’ self-introduction videos.

The video clips were shown to six Japanese students (three male and three female) who participated in the project (Table 1). None of them had any non-Japanese friends or acquaintances. They were asked to mark the list on the self-description sheet based on their impressions of the JFL learners. Semi-structured follow-up interviews were conducted, in Japanese, to discern the reasoning for their evaluations. The authors translated the interview data into English.

Table 1 near here.

## Data analysis

This study focused on JFL learners (three males and three females) who were confident about their videos. Table 2 lists these six (out of thirteen ) learners’ profiles and self-introduction video information.

Table 2 near here.

We compared the self-descriptions of these learners with the judgments of Japanese-native students, expressed in the vocabulary list that they marked while watching the JFL learners’ videos. We created 14 identical sheets for each Japanese student, one for testing and 13 for JFL learner videos. The authors first independently divided the data into five categories based on the NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO PI-R) (Costa et al., 2011; Shimonaka et al., 1998) and then consulted with each other to determine the final categorization. This inventory was originally developed to assess individual personalities (Costa et al., 1995); we used it primarily because of its widespread application. The NEO PI-R has 60 items to provide five basic personality factors: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. For example, the categorization under extraversion lists the self-description “outgoing” as a positive item, and “reserved” as a negative item. Categorized data were first rated giving one positive item 10 points, and one negative item negative 10 points, the aggregate of which gave us the total points. Furthermore, we standardized both groups’ points to compare JFL learners’ self-descriptions and Japanese students’ evaluations.

The interview data were transcribed for analysis and the Japanese students’ evaluations were divided according to how they made their decisions. Following Argyle (1994) and Poyatos (1992), we divided the judgments into verbal and non-verbal communication factors. The analysis of the JFL learner data from the questionnaire highlighted the skills—such as verbal expressions or non-verbal cues—that were used most effectively by JFL learners to represent themselves in the videos.

# Results and Discussion

## JFL learner and rater judgments

Figure 1 shows the results of the JFL learners’ self-descriptions against the judgment of the raters. S stands for “student,” and the numbers correspond to the student number in Table 2. The solid lines indicate the JFL learners’ self-description and the dotted lines indicate the rating of the Japanese evaluators. Although most JFL learners’ self-descriptions differed from the rater’s evaluation results, one learner’s self-description was close (S3).

Figure 1 near here.

## JFL learners’ intentions and evaluation factors

Based on the Japanese students’ rating data, collected during a follow-up interview, we examined the factors behind their judgments. Figure 2 illustrates the results. Each JFL learner’s self-description was examined based on whether the raters’ decisions were based on verbal or non-verbal communication factors. For example, if the raters’ evaluations were based on story content, we categorized it as a verbal factor, and if the evaluations were based on paralinguistic aspects such as gestures or learner’s appearance, we categorized these as non-verbal factors. As shown in Figure 2, most judgments were motivated by non-verbal factors.

Figure 2 near here.

Most raters’ comments concerned paralinguistic factors—tone and volume of voice, and speed of speech—covered under “the way they talk” (39%). At the interview, we confirmed the specific rating for “the way they talk.” In this instance “speaking slowly” was equated with “calm,” whereas “speaking energetically” was rated as “energetic.” The JFL learners’ facial expressions (9%) and gestures (7%) were also rated. For example, smiling was regarded as a sign of a “friendly person,” and bowing at the beginning or end of the self-introduction was rated as a “respectful person.” The rater’s decisions were mostly based on non-verbal factors, which supports previous research.

## Differences in self-description and rater’s judgments

In the next section, we focus on two cases in which learner’s self-description and raters’ judgments differed the most (S1) and the least (S3).

# Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the online self-introductions of JFL learners, along with their communication intentions, to shed light on how learners introduce themselves, and what skills they need to effectively communicate with the addressees. The results support the findings of previous studies that non-verbal factors are important in L2 learners’ utterances. However, they also indicated that the learners’ self-descriptions and raters’ judgments aligned when they were based on verbal aspects. For language learners, self-introductions often constitute the first steps and more attention should be devoted to helping learners to convey their intentions. We believe a syllabus that focuses more on the individual (Kobayashi, 2005, 2016; Sato et al., 2015) is effective in assisting learners to achieve this goal. This study concludes that learners need both non-verbal and verbal skills to effectively communicate, and further research is needed in this area.

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References