**Conveying the Self in a Foreign Language: Exploring JFL Learners’ Self-introduction**

Author(s) Name(s)

Role(s)

Institutional Affiliation(s)

Correspondence details

# Abstract

In this project, Japanese and English foreign language learners interacted on Facebook through self-introductions. We observed how learners of Japanese introduced themselves, their intentions, and the skills needed by the speakers to communicate effectively. Video and survey data were collected, including learners’ self-evaluations, and interviews were conducted with students in counterpart schools to evaluate the interactions. The most successful examples were identified and effective skills were extrapolated. The results showed discrepancies between learners’ self-evaluations and addressees’ opinions; it was evident that non-verbal communication strategies played an important role in successful conveyances. We provide a brief overview of the project and report salient results of the data analysis. Pedagogical implications are explored and alternative approaches to language pedagogy are suggested.

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

**Conveying the Self in a Foreign Language: Exploring JFL Learners’ Self-introduction**

Language education needs to respond to individual needs, but many language lessons focus on providing learners with sets of patterns. For example, there are sets of self-introduction patterns for which learners can fill in the blanks to “create” their self-introductions. However, this activity rarely transcends a template word game and is far from a creative endeavor. Learners who want to express their personalities are limited by those set patterns and cannot effectively convey their individuality. As a result, everyone begins to sound like the same person.

In the present study, the researchers interrogate the current language-learning environment and argue for a syllabus that reflects individual needs, in contrast to the more common functional syllabus, or even the situational (*bamen*) syllabus (Kobayashi, 2005, 2016; Sato et al., 2015). We focus on the self-introductions of Japanese Foreign Language (JFL)learners and what they try to convey, how they introduce themselves, and what kind of skills they need to effectively communicate these points to the addressee.

# Literature Review

To date, much research has been conducted on how language learners’ linguistic performance is judged. Research indicates that learners’ linguistic performance 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: Japanese language teachers, nonlanguage teachers, beginner-level JFL learners, and advanced level JFL learners to see how they evaluated the speech of JFL learners (pitch and timing in sentences). The results showed that, somewhat predictably, 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 discern criteria for positive and negative evaluation. The results showed that Japanese teachers tend to negatively evaluate sociolinguistic competence (such as failure to use honorifics), but Japanese college students, in contrast, give positive evaluations for the same lack of honorifics. 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), and 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 more on the speakers’ attitude. Other studies (e.g., Choi 2008, 2013) also examined Japanese teacher and non-teacher evaluations of JFL conversations and found similar results, namely 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 young people, namely college students (n 60), feel about their sociability. The discourses of JFL learners were recorded before and after study abroad. The frequency of hedges, and raters’ evaluations were compared. The results demonstrated that, after studying abroad, the JFL learners’ use of hedges increased significantly, as did the ratings by college students. Iwasaki claims that JFL learners who use hedges frequently are able “to socially package their messages effectively” (Iwasaki, 2013, p. 263) as well as to “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.

The studies mentioned above indicate that the evaluations of learners’ linguistic performance are contingent upon the evaluator. However, few studies focus on the learners’ intentions. 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).

Concerning these issues, many scholars note the recent shift in language education away 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 revisit language education and shift focus from grammar and teaching sets of grammatical structures to developing skills suited to individual needs. Rather than teaching standardized grammatical points, content should be adjusted to better fit individual needs (Noda, 2005, p. 18). Kobayashi (2005) also supports this position, contending that beginner Japanese grammar does not include the learner’s point of view.

To further mine this area, the present study focused on JFL learner intentions by examining their self-introductions along with what they were attempting to convey. We also analyzed how learners introduced themselves and what kind of skills the speakers needed to effectively communicate these points to the addressees.

# Method

## Project Overview

The project comprised exchanges between JFL and EFL (English Foreign Language) learners at universities in the U.S. and Japan, lasting from September to December 2016. The purpose was to encourage students to go beyond classroom learning into voluntary, self-directed learning, as well as using 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 in Japanese. Conversely, on the English page, EFL learners posted their videos in English and American college students (JFL learners) commented in English. 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 into 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 specifically to their video self-introductions (Appendix A). The questions were as follows: 1) How would you describe yourself? Write the keywords that capture how you see yourself; 2) Do you think you were able to portray yourself as you intended to in a Facebook video? If yes, what kind of things did you try, or how did you show who you are in the video? If no, why do you think that you could not show who you are? What was difficult about it? 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 due date for the EFL learners was scheduled for earlier than the JFL learners’ date, which gave the JFL learners the chance to see their counterparts’ videos and gave them 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 selected, 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 the dedicated Facebook page and created a single 11.5-minute video of six patterns from the introductions. To avoid showing the same order of patterns, we further created differing patterns for the order of self-introductions. Additionally, we gathered questionnaire data from those 13 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 into one translation. For example, the words “talkative” and “verbose” were merged into the Japanese word *oshaberina*. The list consisted of 36 Japanese words and served as a document for the Japanese students to use 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 at that point. 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 with the Japanese students, in Japanese, to discern the reasoning for their evaluations. The authors translated the interview data into English.

Table 1 near here.

## Data collection procedure

This study focused on JFL learners (three males and three females) who claimed they could express themselves in their videos. Table 2 lists these six (out of 13) 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 the Japanese students 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 self-description “outgoing” is categorized as a positive item under extraversion, while “reserved” is categorized as a negative item under extraversion. 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.

A native Japanese research assistant transcribed the interview data for analysis. Based on the interview data, we divided Japanese students’ evaluations according to how they made their decisions while watching the JFL learners’ videos. 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 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 (S3) self-description was close.

Figure 1 near here.

## JFL learners’ intentions and evaluation factors

Based on the Japanese students’ rating data, which we 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 made 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, as indicated by previous research.

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 the speakers need to effectively communicate these points to the addressees. The results support the findings of previous studies, that non-verbal factors play an important role in L2 learners’ utterances. However, our results also indicated that the learners’ self-description and raters’ judgments were aligned when they were based on verbal aspects. For language learners, self-introductions often constitute the first steps and may seem easy for non-novice learners, but it might be worth devoting more attention and practice to what it is one truly wants to convey. We believe a syllabus that focuses more on the individual (Kobayashi, 2005, 2016; Sato et al., 2015) provides one of the most effective ways for language learners to achieve this goal. Although the current study suggests that learners need both non-verbal and verbal skills to effectively communicate, the data set was small, and we need to continue collecting data and conducting research in this area.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References