Politeness of Japanese Learners in Cross-Cultural Mandarin Classrooms

Chun-mei Chen*

Abstract

This study investigates how politeness of Japanese learners is delivered in their L2 Mandarin inquiry, agreements or disagreements, and how their politeness is perceived by their instructors and peers in cross-cultural Mandarin classrooms. Based on 60 hours of video-taping and transcription of Elementary Chinese classroom discourse, in which data from 3 Mandarin language instructors, 8 Japanese learners, and 36 learners from other countries were included, Japanese learners have been reported as the most indirect in classroom inquiry and discussion. Negative responses from Japanese learners have been reported the least among the elementary-level learners of Mandarin. When pairing with English-speaking learners of Mandarin in cross-cultural communication, Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin have been reported the most cooperative. Discourse analysis of classroom data has revealed that silence and repairs as are important cues for refusal and disagreements. The politeness of Japanese learners was further verified by the quantitative number of the usage of L2 Mandarin hao ‘okay’ and dui ‘right’ in response to the instructor’s initiation, feedback, or inquiry. The study provides implications for teaching and learning Chinese as a second language in cross-cultural contexts with specific reference to L2 learners’ cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: politeness, Japanese learners, Chinese as a second language, second language classroom, cross-cultural communication

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1. Introduction

This study investigates how politeness of Japanese learners is delivered in their L2 inquiry, agreements or disagreements, how the politeness of Japanese learners is perceived by their language instructors and the peer in multicultural language classrooms. Politeness has received a great deal of attention across a range of fields (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983). Diverse criticism or modification focuses on the concepts of face, face-threatening act, and the factors that determine the production and interpretation of politeness. Following Brown and Levinson’s (1987) work, politeness can be treated as a system through which a speaker can minimize the threat to one’s or the other’s face, with the purpose of avoiding conflict. Brown and Levinson (1987) further propose positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness includes asserting common ground, displaying interest, and avoiding disagreement, whereas negative politeness includes being indirect, minimizing imposition, and giving deference. Japan is characterized as a ‘negative-politeness culture’, because speakers tend to minimize imposition, and use indirectness and honorifics. Yet, both positive and negative politeness is central to everyday interaction to varying degrees in Japan. In Japanese, it is often not considered polite to ask what others want in more formal or impersonal situations, at least not directly (Haugh, 2007). More examples of indirect inquiry in Japanese have been verified in pragmatic and cross-cultural studies (Suzuki, 1997; Haugh, 2004, 2005; Haugh and Hinze, 2003; Burdelski, 2010; Ohashi, 2003, 2008). Japanese speakers prefer to use politeness formula rather than be original (Clancy, 1986). Research in politeness of Japanese-speaking learners in second language (L2) contexts, specifically Chinese as a second language context, however, remains undeveloped. What is needed is an analysis of the integration of L2 verbal strategies of politeness into cross-cultural communication.

While more and more studies on politeness give more consideration to assessment of appropriateness by the hearers (Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003), the present study discusses Japanese learners’ politeness strategies with the consideration of the interpretations
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and assessments by their Mandarin instructors and peers in cross-cultural language classrooms. When propositional content is kept constant, the use of more indirect illocutions will generally result in more politeness (Leech, 1983). There is an intrinsic ranking of politeness strategies in terms of indirectness (Brown and Levinson, 1987). On the other hand, it has been found that the extensive use of face-saving silences by Japanese students was found to be negatively evaluated by Australian lecturers whose response strategies also resulted in lack of rapport (Nakane, 2006). Face, according to Goffman (1955, 1967), is ‘the public self image’, reputation, the mutual interest of interlocutors to save, maintain, or support each other’s face. Face Threatening Acts (FTA) are either avoided or different strategies are employed. Silence can be used to avoid the imposition, confrontation or embarrassment which may not be avoided when one uses verbal expression (Jaworski, 1993, 1997; Jaworski and Stephens, 1998; Sifianou, 1997). Silence can be used to perform most of the politeness strategies (Sifianou, 1997). Silence can be used as an off-record strategy when it serves as the most indirect form of a speech act (Saville-Troike, 1985; Tannen, 1985). Silence in a cross-cultural language classroom setting, in the context of Chinese as a second language, however, needs to be further investigated.

It is widely agreed that researchers need to base their analysis of politeness on the participants’ behavior and perceptions in relation to the local context of interaction, the specific institutional context, and the wider cultural context (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003). Communication problems are more likely to occur among participants from different socio-cultural backgrounds, due to gaps in the tacit agreement among native speakers as to which forms are conventionalized (Sifianou, 1992). Positive politeness cultures are ones like Australia and America where deference and formality are seen as an impediment to communication (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Bousfield (2008) has made attempts to challenge the notion that UK culture is a negative politeness culture while US culture tends towards positive politeness. Analysts often contrast Asian deference to the role that deference would play in British culture and therefore make the assumption that Asian cultures are in general more concerned with status difference and roles in society than British culture (Mills, 2009). In the present study, the context of L2 Mandarin
classrooms involves its teaching and learning goals, its norms of interaction, and the understanding of the relationships. Factors such as the cultural backgrounds of the L2 learners and the number of the participants could affect the choices of the politeness strategies in a classroom setting.

As far as politeness in L2 language learning is concerned, the application of pragmatics to problems in second language learning is based on the assumption that there are likely significant differences not only in the structure of languages but in their use (Hymes, 1972). There is considerable room for cross-cultural misunderstanding, such as German speakers seem to be significantly less polite in requests and complaints than English speakers (House & Kasper, 1981). Politeness in classrooms, according to Pavlidou (2001), teachers used positive politeness strategies for developing cooperative atmosphere of learning, while students attended to teachers’ negative positive face in orientations of teachers and students. Because of the roles assigned to the participants in classrooms, teachers do not need to attend to students’ negative face, while students do not need to attend to the teachers’ positive face. In Haugh and Hinze’s (2004) analyses of ‘face’ in Chinese and English, they have found that what is common to culture-specific constructs is that they emerge from the dynamic relationship between “what B thinks A thinks of B” and “what A shows A thinks of B”. In order to describe the cross-cultural usage of ‘politeness’ strategies I believe that an analysis based on verbal expressions from natural language avoids obscurity. The concern about the perception of L2 learners’ politeness can be used as the basis for facilitating a deeper understanding of the interpersonal communication in a cross-cultural classroom setting.

This study aims to identify politeness strategies of Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin employed in cross-cultural classrooms, the perceptions of Japanese learners’ politeness, and the role of politeness at the initial stage of language learning in cross-cultural classroom communication, which are crucial issues in terms of successful communication across cultures. This study is important as it focuses on data from university L2 Mandarin classrooms and the students from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is expected that findings from the data will provide insights to cross-cultural communication studies, and second
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language learning and teaching research.

2. Method

In the present study, 60 hours of video-taping data were collected from 3 language classrooms of Elementary Chinese I (First-Year Chinese). Participants include 3 Mandarin language instructors, 8 Japanese learners, and 36 learners from other countries. The target language in the classrooms was Mandarin, whereas the languages for communication were English and Mandarin. The data for this study were collected in one university in Taiwan, including interviews with the peers from different cultural backgrounds who participated in the recorded sessions. Data consisting case studies will be discussed extensively in this paper. All the interviews with the language instructors were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and the comments were translated into English by the author. Interviews with the peers in the L2 Mandarin classrooms were conducted in both English and Mandarin and later transcribed by the author.

2.1. Participants

The Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin used as participants in case studies were 4 males and 4 females, aged 18-24. The Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin were either exchange students or international students in the university. The Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin were recorded in three different L2 Mandarin classrooms (Class A, Class B, and Class C), at the same level of Elementary Chinese. Table 1 is a description of the Japanese participants in the case studies. All the names were pseudonyms.
Table 1: Japanese participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Residency in Taiwan (months)</th>
<th>Classes observed and recorded</th>
<th>Number of the peers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ayako</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Class A</td>
<td>7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chieko</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Class B</td>
<td>12-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Emi</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Class C</td>
<td>18-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Natsumi</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Class C</td>
<td>18-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kenji</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Class B</td>
<td>12-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Masumi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Class A</td>
<td>7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Naoki</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Class B</td>
<td>12-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Shuji</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Class C</td>
<td>18-20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Class A, the language course was conducted three hours per day, five days per week. In Class B and Class C, the language course was conducted three hours per week. Among the eight Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin, two had no learning experience of Mandarin before they arrived in Taiwan, and they were enrolled in Class A. Japanese participants enrolled in Class B and Class C had learned Mandarin for at least three months in Japan. All of them had stayed in Taiwan for less than one year at the time of classroom observation, video-recording, and data collection.

The peers participated in this study were first-year learners of the Mandarin language from thirteen countries, including the United States, Canada, South Africa, Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Italy, Indonesia, Korea, Thailand, Australia, and Ukraine. All of them were L2 learners of Mandarin at elementary level.

Language instructors in the three L2 Mandarin classrooms were in their late 30s and had at least 10 years of experience teaching Mandarin Chinese as a second language in college-level programs. Consent forms were obtained prior to the recordings of their classroom teaching, and interviews were conducted at the end of the course. The three Mandarin instructors were coded as Instructor A, Instructor B, and Instructor C in the
transcription. For certain types of politeness, such as silences or voidance of disagreement, the interview data provide valuable information concerning the perceptions of Japanese participants’ reasons for politeness in L2 Mandarin classrooms.

2.2. Procedure

The participants were video-recorded in their L2 Mandarin classrooms. Each language classroom was recorded at least four times every month during one semester. Pairing dialogues, conversation, and role plays were tape-recorded, with regular classroom observations of the investigator.

The investigator did not interfere in the classroom discourse but was either standing behind the video-camera, or sitting quietly in a corner of the room. The Japanese participants and their peers were engaged in various kinds of classroom tasks.

A set of questionnaire was filled by the language instructors and the peers at the end of the semester. Questions in the survey include polite and impolite verbal expressions in L2 Mandarin, their interactions with Japanese learners, and their perceptions of Japanese learners’ politeness. Interviews were also conducted along with the questionnaire survey.

2.3. Linguistic forms of politeness in L2 Mandarin

Data recorded from classroom discourse were transcribed. Linguistic forms concerning politeness delivery were targeted. In any token-identifying procedure, there is a certain degree of subjective interpretation. To get some indication of the reliability of the identification, the politeness linguistic forms were double-checked with the language instructors who participated in the recording. A random selection of the total tokens of linguistic forms of politeness was confirmed by the language instructors, with an agreement in 95% of the cases. Linguistic forms received disagreed judgements were excluded from the analyses. Linguistic forms of politeness in Japanese learners’ L2 Mandarin include: hao ‘okay’, dui ‘right’, buhaoyisi ‘excuse me/I’m feeling embarrassed’, duibuqi ‘excuse me, sorry’, xiexie ‘thank you’, etc. The question cases include examples where it is impossible to determine the function of a particle, as in wo shi B ma ‘Am I (playing) B (part)’, where it is
difficult to determine whether or not the particle has an inquiry intention.

3. Findings

As all student participants in the present study were first-year learners of Mandarin, silence and pauses were often used as a strategy to avoid loss of face. Insufficient language proficiency and second language anxiety generally resulted in lack of voluntary participation in elementary-level classroom of Chinese as a second language. Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin, though with the advantage of reading and writing Chinese characters, often hesitated to express their verbal opinions or initiating a dialogue in L2 Mandarin classrooms unless assigned. The three Mandarin instructors in the classrooms usually had to initiate a dialogue, had their students warm up to asking each other questions and pair off, and continue to content explanation, followed by role-play or dialogue/narrative presentation. In the following transcription of classroom interaction and interviews, all the names of the L2 learners from other countries were pseudonyms.

L2 learners of Mandarin are socialized into politeness through the use of the target language. In general, verbal routines are crucial to language learning. However, due to the lack of language proficiency, elementary-level L2 learners occasionally used either English or their mother tongue in classroom face-to-face interaction.

Interaction excerpt 1 is an example of a Japanese-speaking learner of Mandarin speaking English in L2 Mandarin classroom, to accommodate her English-speaking peer. The instructor asked the Japanese student Ayako (Case 1) to get acquainted with Anne, also a beginner of L2 Mandarin from the United States.

[Interaction excerpt 1]
1. Ayako: (In English) Hello, your name?
2. Anne: Anne...and your name…?
3. Ayako: (silence) Ayako…so…in Japanese…
4. Anne: Nice to meet you.
5. Ayako: (long silence) thank you… (silence) nice to meet you.
In the excerpt 1, it is interesting to see Ayako initiated the dialogue in English and responded to ‘nice to meet you’ with ‘thank you’, though the instructor encouraged the students to use Mandarin in the classroom. It seemed that Ayako made attempts to express her gratitude for the comment or expression of ‘nice’ and finally end the conversation with ‘nice to meet you’. Silence in the conversation seemed to indicate the anxiety of Ayako when using English to communicate with a native speaker.

The frequent usage of ‘thank you’ in the verbal expression of the Japanese-speaking learner Ayako was attested in another pair dialogue with a student Phanit from Thailand. The following excerpt illustrated Ayako’s preference for polite form in her L2 Mandarin.

**[Interaction excerpt 2]**

1  Phanit:  
*Ni hao.*  
‘Hello.’

2  Ayako:  
*Ni hao.*  
‘Hello.’

3  Phanit:  
*Ni hao ma?*  
you good PT  
‘How are you?’

4  Ayako:  
*ni hao,* >xie xie.<  
‘hello, thank you.’

5  Phanit:  
*Ni jiao sheme mingzi?*  
you call what name  
‘What’s your name?’

6  Ayako:  
*Wo jiao Ayako, wo shi Ribenren,*  
I call Ayako I am Japanese  
‘My name is Ayako, and I am Japanese.’  
>buhaoyisi<,  
‘Excuse me, you PT  
‘Excuse me, and you?’
8 Phanit:  
*Wo jiao Phanit.*
I call Phanit
‘My name is Phanit.’

9 Ayako:  
* >Xie xie.<*
‘Thank you.’

Ayako, described by her peers Anne (excerpt 1) and Phanit (excerpt 2) in later interviews as often expressing a polite attitude to her classmates, delivered her politeness in her delayed inquiry. Both Anne and Phanit agreed that working with Ayako in pair dialogues was a very pleasant experience and could ease their L2 anxiety.

In the following excerpt, Instructor A asked Ayako to work with Rumpai, a female student from Thailand, because Rumpai did not know the name of Ayako yet. Ayako realized that she did not make Rumpai have a chance to know her name, and she initiated the dialogue with ‘I did not intend to’, followed by ‘sorry’. The purpose of the dialogue was to know each other’s name. Ayako refrained from making an inquiry by filling the gap with laughter and polite verbal form of ‘sorry’ in Mandarin. Finally, Rumpai took the turn by asking the name of Ayako. Rumpai described the experience as being treated ‘politely’, as getting to know each other required mutual agreement and cooperation. “Ayako did not need to say ‘sorry’ in this case”, said Rumpai.

[Interaction excerpt 3]

1 Ayako:  
* >Wo meiyou a...*
‘I did not intend to…’

2 Rumpai:  
* Oh, (laughter)*

3 Ayako:  
* >Duibuqi.<*
‘Sorry.’

4 Rumpai:  
* Ni jiao sheme mingzi?*
‘Your name?’
When pairing with English-speaking learners of Mandarin in classroom activities, Japanese learners have been reported the most cooperative and never delivering refusal, as pointed out by Instructor A and Instructor B. Negative responses from Japanese learners have been reported the least among the elementary learners in Class A and Class B. Another Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin, Chieko (Case 2), who had learned Mandarin in Japan and had lived in Taiwan for eight months at the time of recordings, delivered her agreements in the excerpt below. Laura was an English-speaking learner of Mandarin from Canada.

[Interaction excerpt 4]

1  Laura: (In English) Chieko, you play the boy’s part.
2   Chieko: Okay.
3  Laura: I read this part, and you read the other part…the longer part.
4   Chieko: Okay.
5  Laura: I’ll go first.
6   Chieko: Okay.

(Instructor B walked to Laura and Chieko.)

7  Laura: (silence) Ni xihuan kan...kan dianying ma? ‘Do you like to see movies?’
     you like see see movie PT

8   Chieko: Dui dui dui (nodding), wo xihuan kan dianying, ‘Right, right, right, I like to see movies.’
   right right right I like see movie

   Wo..... ye xihuan kan dianshi,
   I also like watch TV
   ‘I also like to watch TV.’

9  Dianying, dianshi, wo dou xihuan.
   movie TV I both like
   ‘I like both movies and TV.’
It is interesting to see the language shift from line 7, after Instructor B walked to Laura and Chieko. As all the Mandarin instructors encouraged their students to use Mandarin as much as possible, L2 learners in the classrooms had to speak Mandarin in front of their instructors, though they occasionally spoke English or their mother tongue when the instructors were not standing aside. Chieko accepted all the requests made by Laura and responded in English to show her cooperation, though by saying ‘okay’ she had to be in charge with the longer part in the conversation. No negotiation or request was found in the interaction with Laura. In line 8, Chieko positively answered Laura’s question with nodding, which was not found in Laura’s or any other English-speaking learner’s response. Chieko ended the conversation with ‘thank you’, which was described by Laura in her later interview as ‘kind and polite’. Laura also commented Chieko’s nonverbal nodding and described Chieko’s nodding as ‘adorable’ politeness.

Chieko’s verbal agreement shown in excerpt 4 above did not indicate her overall deference in L2 Mandarin classrooms. Another day, Chieko was assigned to finish a role-play with David, a classmate from Australia, in front of the whole class. David had no idea about what was going on due to his absence of the previous class. Chieko seemed to take the major turns in the conversation, as shown in the following excerpt.

[Interaction excerpt 5]

1. David: (long silence)……
2. Chieko: He [bù] xihuan me... (laughter)
   he NEG like me
   ‘He (David) doesn’t like me (code-switching).’
3. Ta [bù] xihuan wo...
   he NEG like me
   ‘He (David) doesn’t like me.’
4. David: NO!!! (English)
5 Chieko: *Dui dui dui, ni bu xihuan wo.*
   right right right you NEG like me
   ‘Right, right, right, you don’t like me.’

6 *Dui bu dui?*
   right NEG right
   ‘Right?’

7 Instructor B: David, *ni shi Li xiansheng.*
   David you are Li gentleman
   ‘David, you are (play the role of) Mr. Li.’

8 Chieko *shi nide pengyou.*
   Chieko is your friend
   ‘Chieko is your friend.’

9 Chieko: *Dui (nodding), ni shi Li xiansheng.*
   right you are Li gentleman
   ‘Right, you are Mr. Li.’

10 *Wo shi nide pengyou, >qing duo zhijiao,<*
    I am your friend please more give advice
    ‘I am your friend. Please give me more advice.’

   okay I understand LE
   ‘Okay, I got it.’

12 Chieko: *Hao, >xie xie,<*
   okay thank you
   ‘Okay, thank you.’

Before David got the rule of the role-play, he kept silent. Chieko took the chance to play a joke on David by saying ‘he doesn’t like me’ in semi-English and Mandarin. Chieko delivered her positive answer with nodding again, as indicated in line 9. Chieko had lived in Taiwan for eight months and learned *qing duo zhijiao* ‘please give me more advice’ from her
Taiwanese friends. Although Chieko was the one who gave real ‘advices’ to David, she modestly introduced the rule in the role-play on a different footing. Chieko ended the conversation with ‘thank you’ again. In later interviews with David, he commented on Chieko’s response and positively confirmed Chieko’s verbal and nonverbal politeness. He appreciated Chieko’s cooperation and humor.

When refusing to take an assignment, Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin often delivered their intention indirectly. The following excerpt shows Case 3 Emi’s disagreement. Case 3 Emi was assigned to finish a pair dialogue with Paul, a classmate from the United States.

[Interaction excerpt 6]

1 Instructor C: (to Case 3 Emi)  

\[ Ni \ shi \ Wang \ xiansheng. \]  

‘You are Mr. Wang.’

2 Emi:  

(long silence)  

(Emi was looking at the Paul and another classmate in front of her.)  

\[ Wo \ shi….Wang \ xiansheng….Wang \ xiansheng. \]  

‘I am Mr. Wang…..Mr. Wang.’

3 Paul:  

\[ Wang \ xiaojie. \]  

‘Miss Wang.’

4 Emi:  

\[ Wang \ xiaojie…dui….Wang \ xiaojie. \]  

‘Miss Wang, Right, Miss Wang.’

As there were 18-20 students in Class C, Instructor C had to finish pairing off within a very short time. She did not notice the gender of her student and the role in the dialogue did not match in Emi’s case. She randomly assigned Emi to play the role of Mr. Wang. Obviously, Emi did not agree with her instructor’s assignment but did not deliver a direct
refusal or made any correction. After a long silence, she repeated the key word ‘Mr. Wang’. It was Paul who figured out the ‘conflict’ and repaired the role of Emi. It can be seen from the excerpt above that silence and repairs are important cues for refusal and disagreements in Emi’s L2 Mandarin.

On the other hand, silence without any repairs may indicate the lack of L2 proficiency in other L2 learner’s discourse in the classroom, as shown in the excerpt below. Case 4 Natsumi was assigned to finish a pair dialogue with Michael, a classmate from South Africa.

[Interaction excerpt 7]

1 Natsumi: >Duibuqi<, qing wen, nimen xuexiao zai nali?
   excuse me please ask you (pl.) school ZAI where
   ‘Excuse me. May I ask: where is your school?’
2 Michael: (long silence)…
3 Natsumi: >Buhaoyisi<, qing wen, nimen xuexiao zai nali?
   excuse me please ask you (pl.) school ZAI where
   ‘Excuse me. May I ask: where is your school?’
4 Michael: Zai Taizhong.
   ZAI Taiching
   ‘In Taichung.’
5 Natsumi: >Xie xie<
   ‘Thank you.’

Natsumi initiated the dialogue by asking Michael a question and ended the dialogue with ‘thank you’, after the short answer from Michael. In line 3, Natsumi repeated his questions, starting with ‘excuse me’ in response to Michael’s long silence, which was considered ‘a very polite expression’ in later interviews with Michael.

Japanese learners have been reported by their instructors as most conservative in inquiry and presentation. In the following excerpt, Instructor B checked the written answers of Case 5 Kenji in a blank-filling task and asked Kenji to work together with Martin, a classmate from the Czech Republic. It was found that Kenji preferred checking answers on
his own, as shown in line 4. It was Martin who confessed his insufficient mastery in the ‘tension’, as indicated by Kenji’s long silence in line 4. Kenji, though later figured out the error, delivered his verbal hesitation to present his hand writing to Martin. According to Instructor B, Kenji’s characters were very neat and beautiful. Instructor B commented on Kenji’s verbal response and stated Kenji was too modest in later interviews.

[Interaction excerpt 8]

1 Instructor B:  
   Zhe ge bu dui.
   this MW NEG right
   ‘This one is incorrect.’

2 Kenji:  >Duibuqi.<
   sorry
   ‘I am sorry.’

3 Instructor B:  
   Ni zhidao nali bu dui ma?
   you know where NEG right PT
   ‘Do you know which part is incorrect?’

4 Kenji:  (long silence)
   (Kenji kept typing on his digital dictionary pad while Martin, sitting next to Kenji, was asking the following question.)

5 Martin:   Laoshi, wo ye bu hui xie zhe ge zi.
   teacher I also NEG can write this MW word
   ‘Teacher, I can’t write this character either.’

6 Instructor B:  (Turned to Martin)  Hao, wo xie zai zheli.
   okay I write ZAI here
   ‘Okay, I write it here.’
   (Instructor B wrote the correct form on Martin’s sheet. Kenji took a look at Martin’s sheet.)

7 Kenji:   Hai (in Japanese)...wo dong le.
   yes I understand LE
'Yes, I got it.'

8 Martin:  

Wo bu dong.  
I NEG understand.

‘I don’t understand’

9 Instructor B:  

Kenji, ni keyi xie yi ci ma?  
Kenji you can write one time PT

‘Kenji, can you write it once (for Martin)?’

10 Kenji:  

>Buhaoyisi<, wo xie de bu haokan.  
embarrassed I write DE NEG good-looking

‘I feel embarrassed. My character is not beautiful.’

(Keiji then wrote the character on Martin’s sheet.)

Japanese learners often said ‘excuse me’ even when it was not necessary. In the following excerpt, Case 6 Masumi was assigned to finish a pair dialogue with Frank, a classmate from Germany. Before answering ‘I am very busy’, Masumi said ‘excuse me’, which was considered redundant and ‘too polite’ in later interviews with Frank. “In German, we are very direct. I am very busy, and it is true. No excusing me.”, said Frank. Masumi also ended the dialogue with ‘thank you.’

[Interaction excerpt 9]

1 Frank: (silence) Ni mang bu mang?  
You busy NEG busy

‘Are you busy?’

2 Masumi: >Duibuqi<, wo hen mang. Ni ne?  
excuse me, I very busy you PT

‘Excuse me, I am very busy. And you?’

3 Frank: (silence) Wo bu mang.  
I NEG busy

‘I am not busy.’

4 Masumi: >Xiebie<
‘Thank you.’

When being corrected by their instructors, most L2 learners repeated the correct form in the following turn. Japanese learners, however, liked to say ‘sorry’ to their instructors. In the following excerpt, Case 7 Naoki was assigned to finish a pair dialogue with Niran, a classmate from Thailand. Both Naoki and Niran were corrected by their instructor on their third tone. Naoki said ‘sorry’ first before he made a correction with a soft voice. Niran, a Thai-speaking learner, simply repeated the word with a wrong tone. Instructor B sated in later interviews that Naoko did not need to say sorry when he produced the wrong tone, as making tonal errors was very common among the L2 learners of Mandarin.

[Interaction excerpt 10]

1 Naoki: Qing wen, ni xihuan he jiu ma?  
please ask you like drink alcohol PT  
‘May I ask: do you like to drink alcohol?’

(Instructor B interrupted Naoki.)

2 Instructor B: Naoki, jiu shi disan sheng.  
Naoki, alcohol is third tone  
‘Naoki, the word alcohol is with the third tone.’

3 Naoki: >Duibuqi<, ni xihuan he jiu ma (soft voice)?  
Sorry you like drink alcohol PT  
‘I am sorry. Do you like to drink alcohol?’ (soft voice)

4 Niran: Wo bu xihuan he jiu.  
I NEG like drink alcohol  
‘I don’t like to drink alcohol.’

(Instructor B interrupted Niran.)

5 Instructor B: Niran, jiu shi disan sheng.  
Niran, alcohol is third tone  
‘Niran, the word alcohol is with the third tone.’
Shuji, a male Japanese student in Class C, was confirmed by his classmates and the instructor as a chorus member in Japan. However, he also delivered his verbal hesitation when being asked to present his singing in front of the whole class. In the following excerpt, Case 8 Shuji was assigned to finish a conversation with Emma, a classmate from Canada, in front of the whole class. Emma made a request all of a sudden. Though verbal agreement was not attested in the excerpt, Shuji finally accepted Emma’s requests and presented his singing.

[Interaction excerpt 11]

1 Emma: Shuji, tingshuo ni change hen haoting.
Shuji, heard you sing very melodious
‘Shuji, I heard your singing sounds nice.’

2 Shuji: (silence) Etto (in Japanese)...meiyou...meiyou.
and no no
‘Umm...no...no.’

3 >Buhaoyisi<, bu haoting ... bu ting.
embarrassed NEG melodious NEG melodious
‘I feel embarrassed. (My singing) doesn’t sound nice
...doesn’t sound nice.’

4 Emma: Ni jiao women chang Riwen ge, hao ma?
you teach us sing Japanese song good PT
‘You teach us Japanese songs, all right?’

5 Shuji: >Duibugi<, wo chang de bu hao...
sorry I sing DE NEG good
‘I am sorry. My singing is not good.’

6 Emma: No, hen hao.
no, very good
‘No, (your singing is) very good.’

(Other students applauded and asked Shuji to sing a Japanese song.)

7 Shuji: >Duibuqi<, zhengde bu haoting.
sorry really NEG melodious
‘I am sorry. (My singing is) really not good.’

(Shuji then sang a Japanese song.)

Emma recalled this experience in later interviews and described Shuji as being too polite and too shy. Emma thought Shuji would not take her request, as he kept saying ‘my singing is not good’, which was considered as a rejection in Emma’s language. Emma was a little surprised when Shuji sang a song after the verbal hesitation.

Japanese learners’ tendency toward deferential behavior was not always positively evaluated by all the instructors in L2 Mandarin classroom. In cross-cultural L2 Mandarin classrooms, the deference, delayed inquiry, indirectness, silence, hesitation in class presentation of Japanese learners could be a burden in accelerating their language proficiency. The following interview excerpts show the instructor’s comments.

[Interview excerpts]

Instructor A:

(1) “Ayako always agrees with what I say in class without any comments.” (Case 1)
(2) “Ayako seldom asked me any question and did not volunteer in question-initiation. I think she is too polite…” (Case 1)
(3) “Masumi is very polite and often says thank you, But I think he should talk more in class.” (Case 6)

Instructor B:

(4) “Chieko often says hao ‘okay’ or dui ‘right’ (agreements), or English okay during classroom activities.” (Case 2)
(5) “Chieko is very polite and often says words with smile and nodding in a softening voice.” (Case 2)
“Kenji often feels embarrassed. His Mandarin is good, compared with the other students in my class. He is very modest, and I think he should do more oral presentations.” (Case 5)

“Naoki is a gentleman. He should speak Mandarin loudly and confidently. He is very quiet and never interrupts his classmates and me in the class.” (Case 7)

**Instructor C:**

(8) “I felt that Emi would have been happy to be in the corner and kept silence.” (Case 3)

(9) “Emi is very quiet and always follows my imperatives without any opinions.” (Case 3)

(10) “When Natsumi pronounced the words during the routine drills, I could hardly hear her voice. I asked her to repeat again, but she did not seem to raise her voice.” (Case 4)

(11) “Shuji often responds to my proposal with positive answers, and he says xie xie ‘thank you’ to me very often. (Case 8)

In addition to the instructor’s comments, deferential behaviour of Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin toward their instructors were verified by the quantitative number of the usage hao ‘okay’ and dui ‘right’ in the responses to their instructor’s initiation, feedback, or inquiry. Based on 15 hours of video recordings from Week 4 to Week 8, the verbal tokens of hao ‘okay’ and dui ‘right’ between Japanese-speaking and English-speaking learners of Mandarin were compared, as illustrated in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L2 Learners</th>
<th>hao ‘okay’</th>
<th>dui ‘right’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japanese-speaking learners (n=8)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-speaking learners (n=8)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N=16)</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Obviously, Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin used dui ‘right’ much more often than English-speaking learners of Mandarin in the interactions with the language instructors. The deferential expression of ‘non-negotiation’ could be considered as the politeness strategy of Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin. By delivering a positive answer in their L2 Mandarin, they can minimize the threat to their instructor’s face in a classroom setting.

4. Discussion

The findings reported above have revealed the polite patterns of Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin in cross-cultural classrooms. The frequent usage of L2 Mandarin ‘thank you’ and ‘excuse me’ in the verbal expressions among the Japanese learners was attested in the classroom discourse. The politeness of Japanese learners could ease the anxiety of some L2 learners at the initial stage of language learning in cross-cultural classroom communication, at least for those from English-speaking and Thai-speaking cultures. Japanese learners have been reported most cooperative and often say hao ‘okay’ and dui ‘right’. The positive agreements and indirectness in disagreements of Japanese learners prevented the face loss of their peers and their instructors. Interviews with the peers from other countries have shown that working with Japanese learners in pair dialogues was a very pleasant experience. Japanese learners’ verbal and nonverbal politeness was also confirmed by German-speaking and Czech-speaking learners of Mandarin. Japanese speakers prefer to use politeness formula rather than be original (Clancy, 1986). This study reconfirms the politeness of Japanese-speaking learners, in the context of cross-cultural Mandarin classrooms.

On the other hand, politeness strategies of Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin in response to the language instructors include positive agreements, indirectness, silence, repairs, and delayed inquiry. Japanese learners tended to express deference in L2 classroom discourse. When being asked to deliver answers or doing presentations in front of their peers, Japanese learners tended to be hesitant and involuntary. Although Japanese learners expressed no negotiations with their instructors, silences would be selected by Japanese
Politeness of Japanese Learners in Cross-Cultural Mandarin Classrooms

learners to express negative answers. Japanese learners refrained from expressing disagreements in response to their instructor’s assignments. The use of silence, instead of verbal expressions of refusal or disagreement, can be identified as the politeness strategy in the cross-cultural language classrooms. Silence in disagreements could be a realization of the ‘Don’t do the Face Threatening Act (FTA)’ strategy. Sifianou (1997) claims that silence can be used to perform most of the politeness strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1987). In the classroom setting of the present study, silence can be used as a politeness strategy when it functions as a sign of rapport. However, silence of Japanese learners was not always positively evaluated by their language instructors. Silence strategy avoided face-threatening but on the other hand hindered the progress of verbal communication in second language learning. To prevent from being impolite, Japanese learners might avoid verbal expressions. Interviews with the instructors have shown that constant and extensive silence will affect the overall pragmatic development of Japanese learners. In the framework of Japanese schooling, teachers are often regarded as holding the authority for knowledge, and students perceive the knowledge without question (cf. Yoneyama, 1999). Japanese learners seemed to transfer their Japanese schooling culture to their L2 Mandarin classrooms.

Following Goffman’s (1967) definition of face, “the positive value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967:5), it is assumed that L2 learners of Mandarin wish to behave and speak in particular ways by which they achieve a positive public self image. The particular ways in which they choose to behave and speak are influenced by their cultures. Japanese learners’ silence or indirectness as a politeness strategy to protect their positive face includes ‘the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired’ (Brown and Levinson, 1987:62). It should be noted that in the institutional setting of university language classrooms, a large amount of knowledge is shared, and the relative expectations associated with the L2 learners are reinforced through classroom interactions. Many of the inquiries in the data presented in this study involve what House (1989) terms a ‘standard situation’. The contextual information provided by such a ‘standard situation’ is to bridge the gap between
the meaning of a verbal polite expression and its pragmatic force. The task in L2 Mandarin learners’ pragmatic development in the next step is to find out what social norms of politeness prevail in a context beyond language classrooms, such as specific local language communities. Such norms may be relative to the cultural backgrounds of the L2 learners, levels of L2 proficiency, kinds of situations, the relation between speakers and hearers, etc.

The analyses of the empirical data in the present study seem to show that Japanese learners’ use of politeness strategies is negotiated in each relationship and classroom context. It can be seen from the pair dialogues with L2 learners from other cultures that Japanese learners engaged in assessing threats to their own faces as well as to other L2 learners’ face in different situations. Avoidance of inquiry in oral presentations can be a strategy to maintain positive face of Japanese learners, whereas indirectness in disagreement and silence can be a ‘Don’t do the FTA’ strategy to save the peer’s or the instructor’s face. Analyses of the classroom discourse have also revealed that silence or repairs can be used as realization of face-saving strategies by Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin in cross-cultural language classrooms.

5. Conclusion

In this study, politeness strategies of Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin in a classroom setting have been investigated. From the receiver’s perspectives, Japanese learners have been reported the most indirect in classroom inquiry and disagreement. In a cross-cultural classroom with L2 learners from different cultures, Japanese learner’s politeness strategies were positively evaluated by their peers. Avoidance of disagreement can be a typical strategy to prevent face-threatening and save the hearer’s face in cross-cultural classrooms. The politeness of Japanese learners is verbally and nonverbally delivered in their L2 Mandarin inquiry, agreements (with nodding), or disagreements. Negative responses from Japanese learners have been reported the least among the elementary-level learners of Mandarin. When pairing with English-speaking learners of Mandarin in cross-cultural communication, Japanese-speaking learners of Mandarin have been reported
the most cooperative. Japanese learners’ deferential behavior was not always positively evaluated by all the instructors in L2 Mandarin classrooms. Extensive silence, delayed inquiry, indirectness, or involuntary participation in class presentations can be seen as an impediment to language proficiency acceleration. It is suggested that L2 Mandarin instructors create more negotiation opportunities and encourage Japanese learners to participate in voluntary initiation and inquiry in cross-cultural classroom discourse.

It was also found in the present study that silence and repairs are most important cues for refusal and disagreements among the Japanese learners. The politeness of Japanese learners was further verified by the quantitative number of the usage of L2 Mandarin hao ‘okay’ and dui ‘right’ in response to the instructor’s initiation, feedback, or inquiry. The present study also emphasises the importance of considering the cross-cultural context in research on L2 learners’ pragmatics and language teaching. The analysis of the perceptions on the politeness strategy of Japanese learners revealed that there are high levels of cross-cultural agreements among English-speaking and Thai-speaking learners of Mandarin. This cross-cultural agreement can be explained by the standard nature of the situations. The study provides implications for teaching and learning Chinese as a second language in cross-cultural contexts with specific reference to L2 learners’ cross-cultural communication.

In conclusion, it is hoped that more attention will be given to politeness in cross-cultural pragmatics research. Indirectness, silence, deferential behaviour, for example, could play a role in politeness in cross-cultural communication. Further research could explore how L2 Mandarin learners use their politeness and socializing strategies in interaction with other native speakers of Mandarin and how L2 Mandarin learners develop their cross-cultural pragmatic competence in a local language community.

**Works Cited**


Politeness of Japanese Learners in Cross-Cultural Mandarin Classrooms


Politeness of Japanese Learners in Cross-Cultural Mandarin Classrooms

跨文化華語課室日籍學習者禮貌言談行為之研究

陳春美*

摘 要

本篇論文調查日籍華語學習者的禮貌言談行為如何在他們的第二語言詢問、同意與意見不一的表達中呈現，以及他們的禮貌言談行為在跨文化的華語課室中如何讓他們的同儕與老師察覺到。本研究以60個小時的課室錄影與課室言談謄寫的語料為基礎，包含了3位華語老師、8位日籍華語學習者與36位來自不同國家的初級華語學習者語料。調查結果發現，日籍華語學習者在詢問與討論過程中最為迂迴，負面的反應語句也最少。當與母語為英語的學習者進行小組跨文化溝通練習時，日籍華語學習者最為樂意合作。言談分析結果發現，沉默與修正為日籍華語學習者拒絕或否定的重要提示。日籍華語學習者的禮貌言談行為進一步由他們在回應老師時口語使用華語「好」與「對」的數量得到證實。本研究提供跨文化環境下第二語言學習者跨文化溝通表現的華語教學與華語學習啟示。

關鍵詞：禮貌言談行為、日籍學習者、對外華語、第二語言課室、跨文化溝通

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