Chapter 1: Negotiating politeness practices and interpersonal connections in L2 Japanese: Insights from study abroad narratives

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Abstract

One of the main challenges and opportunities for language learners in a study abroad context is learning to navigate the routines of L2 social interaction and politeness practices necessary for establishing oneself as a legitimate social actor and forming meaningful interpersonal connections. This can be particularly difficult when there is significant divergence between learners' self-presentation strategies and understandings of politeness associated with their existing languages and those that are prevalent in the new cultural environment. This paper reports on a study examining the ways in which L2 Japanese learners enrolled at UK universities made sense of their experience of politeness within the context of forming interpersonal connections during study abroad in Japan. It presents narrative accounts based on interviews with university students who studied at a partner institution in Japan for 9-12 months. Analysis focuses on the ways that learners not only attempted to understand the cultural significance of politeness forms according to contextual norms but also actively incorporated their knowledge of other languages and cultures into their developing understandings of politeness.

Introduction

Within the field of modern language education, there is increasing recognition of the importance of making intercultural learning an integrated part of the theory and practice of developing language abilities, including within Japanese language education (e.g., Fujino, Hagiwara, Nishizawa, Morimoto & Oeda, 2018; Liddicoat, 2008, Ohashi & Ohashi, 2020; Toyoda, 2016). The incorporation of an intercultural perspective into teaching and learning takes on particular importance for teachers who hope to develop attentive and reflective learners that can enhance their pragmatic abilities and deepen intercultural understanding before, during, and after study abroad. The study abroad experience is widely seen as a critical context for the development of pragmatic abilities due to the opportunities for observing and participating in interactions in a variety of contexts where the consequentiality of linguistic

choices can be experienced in more intense and context-sensitive ways than in the classroom (e.g., Cook, 2008; Kinginger, 2009; Sánchez-Hernández & Alcón-Soler, 2019; Shively 2013; Taguchi, 2015). Yet, despite the powerful opportunities afforded by study abroad, negotiating behavioural expectations and social relationships in a new cultural context can place cognitive, affective, and behavioural demands on learners that lead to a sense of being overwhelmed (Jackson & Oguro, 2018).

One of the main challenges and opportunities for language learners in a new cultural environment is learning to navigate the routines of L2 social interaction and politeness practices necessary for establishing oneself as a legitimate social actor and forming meaningful interpersonal connections (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016; Kinginger 2009). One challenge for learners is that the reality of language used to index social categorizations and construct the impression of politeness is likely to be much more fluid and dynamic than the rules of thumb that learners have been exposed to during formal learning. In this paper, we suggest that the experience of gradually opening up to more complex perspectives on politeness practices plays an important role in creating potential for the development of intercultural understanding. This largely hinges on the degree to which learners pay attention to patterns of language use in context, reflect on how such patterns reflect culturally constructed conceptions of the social world, and relate their observations to existing knowledge of languages and cultures.

Linking L2 politeness and intercultural understanding in the study abroad context

The development of L2 pragmatic abilities within the study abroad context has received a considerable amount of attention in the literature, with a dominant focus on how learners develop the ability to comprehend and produce the L2 in line with native speaker norms. Such studies tend to be primarily concerned with the impact of variables within the learning context on patterns of pragmatic development and ultimate attainment, such as length of residence, exposure to input, context of exposure, as well as individual difference variables (Taguchi, 2018). This means that there has generally been less attention to the nature of pragmatic development and the acquisition of intercultural insights as perceived and experienced by learners themselves. Although some work has looked at the relationship between L2 pragmatic learning and intercultural competence (e.g., Taguchi 2015, 2018; Taguchi, Xiao & Li, 2016), there is a tendency to treat these as separate variables rather than as integrated elements.

With respect to the learning of L2 politeness in a study abroad context, some studies have adopted a theoretical perspective which recognizes the importance of learners' own situated interpretations of Japanese politeness practices (e.g., Ishihara & Tarone, 2009; Iwasaki, 2011; Siegal 1996). Iwasaki's (2011) qualitative study of how four L1 speakers of English perceived their experiences of L2 Japanese politeness highlighted the importance of context and the experience of new role relations in providing opportunities for developing a more nuanced understanding of the meanings of politeness forms, their indexical properties, and their interactional effects. Learners reported particular surprise that speech forms that they had been advised not to use due to being "impolite" were routinely used by same-aged peers to index closeness. Whilst this was a source of disillusionment, it pushed them to gradually build up a more nuanced picture of the actual interactional possibilities. Meanwhile, studies by Siegal (1994) and Ishihara & Tarone (2009) which have sought to understand learner subjectivity have highlighted that many learners experience resistance in relation to L2 politeness practices, including different ways of indexing social relations through personal pronouns, imposition-avoidance strategies, gendered speech styles, and honorifics. As a whole, these studies underscore the reality that the process of learning the pragmatics of a second language – particularly politeness – necessarily engages learners' existing sense of self and emotional commitment to enacting the relationship between self and others in preferred ways.

Whilst the studies above do not explicitly adopt an intercultural lens, Liddicoat & McConachy (2019) have recently argued for the need to see the learning of politeness as an interpretative process that is inherently interlingual and intercultural in nature. The fundamental assumption that learning is a process of interpretation rather than simply learning to recognise stable associations between linguistic forms and meanings is underpinned by the view that politeness itself is an impression constructed in interaction with others rather than an inherent property of "polite forms" (Fraser & Nolan, 1981). Although ideologies of politeness tend to induce individuals to perceive politeness as an entity of its own that is stable and enduring, the reality of politeness within the context of interactions is that it ultimately needs to be interpreted by interactants as part of the larger process of evaluating situations and people (Eelen, 2001). For L2 learners, thus, the learning of politeness necessarily engages learners' existing assumptions about the nature of social roles and expectations regarding the linguistic enactment of politeness across different dimensions of social relationships which have been developed through experiences of interacting in their L1 (and any other languages). This means that the

process of learning is one in which learners actively interpret linguistic forms within the context of social relationships and particular interactional contexts, drawing on their existing cultural understandings of the social world linked to the L1 and their emerging knowledge of the L2 and the cultural meanings associated with its use.

One possible learning trajectory is one in which learners come to recognize the ways that L2 forms are put to use in the service of politeness but nevertheless view these in negative terms due to imposing assumptions about social relationships imported from one's home context. For example, one of the male participants from the U.S. in Ishihara & Tarone's (2009) study experienced resistance to honorifics in Japanese due to (perceivably) violating egalitarian assumptions. Whilst he was able to offer reasons for his critique, he did not call into question the nature of his own assumptions about egalitarian social structures. From the perspective of intercultural understanding, a more desirable learning trajectory is one in which learners decentre from their existing assumptions about how politeness can be expressed through language in order to accommodate new ways of construing social relationships and underlying systems of rights and obligations in various contexts of language use (Liddicoat, 2017; McConachy, 2018). This requires that learners gradually build up a more complex understanding of the different ways that linguistic forms are used to enact politeness and a willingness to see new politeness practices as meaningful within a different framework of assumptions about social relationships. It is such a process that is conducive to the development of intercultural understanding, as learners come to perceive the politeness practices of different languages as legitimate in their own right, reflecting different culturally shaped understandings of the social world.

Based on the view of L2 politeness learning articulated above, we examine the ways in which L2 Japanese learners enrolled at a university in the UK made sense of their lived experiences of Japanese politeness forms and practices within the context of forming interpersonal connections during study abroad in Japan. We highlight the ways that learners not only attempted to understand the cultural significance of politeness forms and practices according to contextual norms but also actively incorporated their knowledge of other languages and cultures into their evolving understandings. Before introducing more details about the study, we provide an overview of linguistic politeness in Japanese.

Overview of linguistic politeness in Japanese

Japanese politeness has attracted a large amount of attention in the pragmatics literature, particularly since Japanese scholars critiqued assumptions about social relations in Brown & Levinson's (1978) face-based model of politeness (e.g., Hill, Ide, Kawasaki & Ogino, 1986; Ide, 1989, 2006; Matsumoto 1988). Whereas Brown & Levinson had argued that politeness functions primarily as a way to mitigate face threats amongst individuals, Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) both argued that politeness in Japan needs to be examined from a more group-oriented perspective wherein politeness is closely associated with selecting linguistic forms that appropriately index one's position relative to others within the matrix of social relations. Ide (1989; 2006) refers to this as discernment-based politeness, which can be contrasted with the volition-based politeness evident in Brown & Levinson's work. A key assumption in a discernment view of politeness is that politeness in Japan takes on a much more obligatory nature due to the weight of social norms and the fact that every linguistic choice has the potential to be evaluated as polite or impolite (i.e., politeness is not limited to face-threatening speech acts). However, this perspective has also been critiqued by a number of scholars (e.g., Cook, 2006; Kadar & Mills, 2013; Pizziconi, 2011) for portraying politeness as a matter of making "correct" linguistic selections, which assumes that norms themselves are mostly transparent and widely shared. This obscures the reality that politeness norms are always ideological in the sense that they contribute to the reproduction of existing power relationships (Matsumoto & Okamoto, 2003). Moreover, the idea that politeness is primarily a matter of correct selection neglects the reality that speakers of all languages make agentive decisions to create their own meanings and position themselves as social actors in a dynamic way based on aspects of context relevant to an interaction (Cook, 2006; Pizziconi, 2011).

Within Japanese language education, instruction on politeness tends to take a largely discernment-based view in which use of forms is dictated by relatively static notions about participant relations. This tends to take the form of instruction on the three main speech styles in Japanese: the plain form speech style, addressee honorifics (also referred to as *desu/masu* forms), and referent honorifics. The term "keigo" (honorific language) is used variably by educators and researchers to refer either to referent honorifics or both addressee and referent honorifics. Linguistically, speech styles are marked through sets of endings that appear at the

sentence-final position, as illustrated below.

(1) a. *Sensei wa Tōkyō ni sunde-i**ru***.
b. *Sensei wa Tōkyō ni sunde-i**masu***.
c. *Sensei wa Tōkyō ni sunde-i**rasshai-masu***.
Teacher TOP -- Tokyo LOC -- live TE-AUX
"The teacher lives in Tokyo."

(footnote: TOP topic marker, LOC locative, TE te-form (conjuctive particle), AUX auxiliary verb.)

All three examples have the same referential meaning and differ only in the speech style. In (1a), the auxiliary verb is in the plain form, *iru*. In (1b), it appears in addressee honorifics, *imasu*. Addressee honorifics are also called *desu/masu* forms for the endings. *Desu* is the copula used with nouns, adjectives, and adjectival nouns, whereas *masu* attaches to verbs. (1c) is an example of referent honorifics. The auxiliary verb appears in the respectful form, *irassharu*, combined with the *masu* ending.

An important point to note is that explanations on when to use each speech style in textbooks typically rely on oversimplified rules of thumb that present static relationships between linguistic forms and contextual variables (Cook, 2008; Matsumoto & Okamoto, 2003). The plain form speech style tends to be associated with informal speech when speaking with close friends and family members. Addressee honorifics are presented as the default for interactions with non-intimates and referent honorifics are typically associated with formal situations and situations with notable hierarchical distance between speakers, such as age and social distance. Thus, there is a strong tendency to present politeness as an innate property of forms themselves, and speech styles are presented in a way that suggests that they are mutually exclusive (Cook, 2008). It is also worth noting that there has been a preference for devoting more instructional energy to honorifics than plain forms in beginner-level classrooms due to the perception that they are much "safer" in terms of ensuring that learners can achieve a basic sense of politeness in their interactions. In fact, addressee honorifics are the predominant style in most textbooks, even in contexts where their use would be unnatural (Cook, 2008).

This pedagogical emphasis on pragmatic rules of thumb stands in contrast with research on Japanese speech styles, which shows their usage is not determined solely by degree of intimacy and situational formality. Speakers of Japanese shift between speech styles even within a single interaction with the same interlocutor in order to create particular rhetorical effects or to index features of identity. For example, even when using addressee honorifics as the norm, speakers may switch to plain forms to state summaries, facts, and convictions (Makino, 2002), to express empathy (Ikuta, 1983), soliloquy, or to signal closeness (Okamoto, 1999), and speakers are actively involved in the creation of pragmatic and social meanings through them. In short, Japanese speakers mix honorific and non-honorific forms "to create a desired context, in particular, preferred interpersonal relations and identities" (Okamoto, 1999: 70). For language learners who have been socialized into a view of politeness based on rules of thumb, coming to gradually observe the reality of speech style usage provides opportunities for developing more complex understandings of the relationships between politeness practices and the construction of social relationships across languages and cultures.

The study

The study that we report on in this paper is one part of a larger study on the intercultural challenges and opportunities encountered by learners of Japanese during a study abroad period of 9-12 months. In the current study, we examine the connection between learners' understandings of politeness and intercultural understanding. We address the following research questions:

RQ1) How do learners interpret the significance of politeness forms within the context of their interpersonal relations?
RQ2) How does learners' emerging awareness of the significance of politeness forms incorporate an interlingual and intercultural perspective?

In line with our aim to capture participants' understandings of their own experiences, we adopted a qualitative research design as it allows for detailed attention to the "meanings, descriptions, values and characteristics of people and things" (Grbich, 2007: 26). The authors carried out detailed semi-structured interviews with 8 students at two British universities that had returned from a period of study abroad in Japan. Open-ended questions were designed to

allow for participants to go into details about their experiences and perceptions, which allowed the researchers to probe participants' ways of making sense of experience (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

In this study, we examine data from 4 participants who could all be regarded as having intermediate to upper-intermediate Japanese language proficiency at the time of study abroad. We provide basic background details on each participant below: Annika, Victoria, Joseph, Alex.

Annika was a Russian national with Russian as her native language who was a final year sociology major at a UK university. Whilst in Japan, she studied for 9 months in an English-language based social science programme at a university in Hokkaido**.** She had contemplated going straight to Japan for undergraduate degree but decided to come to the UK instead.

Viktoria is an Armenian national with Armenian and Russian as her native languages. She was majoring in Japanese language at a university in the UK and enrolled in the Japanese language programme at a major university in Tokyo for 9 months.

Joseph is a UK national with English as his native language majoring in Japanese studies at university. He had been studying Japanese for about 10 years on and off, following the development of interest in Japan at a young age. He spent 11 months studying at a university in Nagoya.

Alex is a UK national with English as his native language majoring in Japanese studies and computer science at university. He had been studying Japanese for 2 years prior to his study abroad programme, which involved an 11 month stay at a university in Kyoto.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in face-to-face format, via Skype, or via telephone. These interviews were informed by a small number of pre-set questions on topics relating to living circumstances, language learning history, communication in social and institutional contexts, social integration, and intercultural learning. At the time of the interviews, participants had been back in the UK for approximately 6-8 months and were continuing with their studies. Although carrying out interviews retrospectively at such a time

might raise questions as to whether experiences will be fresh enough in participants' memories for accurate recall, our perspective was that a certain amount of time lag is actually beneficial from an intercultural learning perspective, as the process of transitioning back into life at home can be included in the reflection (c.f. Iwasaki, 2011). All interviews were audio recorded by the researchers and recordings were transcribed verbatim by a specialist transcription company.

We initially approached the data from a thematic perspective starting by going through each interview transcript to generate initial codes. Following Saldaña (2016), we utilized a view of qualitative coding in terms of "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 4). Through several iterations of coding, we compared and refined codes, and then condensed recurrent codes into larger thematic groupings which became the main themes for understanding the data set and structuring the analysis presented in this paper (Saldaña, 2016). Two of the most prominent codes that emerged across interviews were "views of language" and "social integration". We then began to look at how these codes were situated within narratives of experience within and across extracts, which led us to the realization that these concepts were intertwined and central to participants' accounts. We thus established a main theme of "language and social integration" which provided a lens for analyzing participants' experiences of politeness and forming interpersonal connections. Similar with Iwasaki's (2011) study, one limitation of the current data is that it does not present interactional data to reveal the empirical nature of politeness practices as experienced by learners. However, as argued by Jackson (2018), narrativized accounts that represent the phenomenology of perception are important not only for understanding learners' situated processes of meaning-making and intercultural learning but also for informing pedagogical interventions.

The data

Our analysis focuses on how participants relate to and with politeness forms. It illustrates the significance that polite forms take on in the context of L2 Japanese speakers' attempts to form interpersonal connections with others and express a sense of self, and how participants open up to more nuanced understandings of the nature of politeness. We highlight the ways that learners not only attempted to understand the cultural significance of politeness practices according to contextual norms but also actively incorporated their knowledge of other

languages and cultures into their understandings of politeness. Due to the unique trajectory of experience and perceptions of each participant, we present the data according to each participant.

Annika's account

Annika arrived in Japan with basic confidence in her ability to use addressee honorifics (*desu/masu* forms) and rule-of-thumb knowledge about referent honorifics (*keigo*), which she later experienced as crucial for establishing herself as a legitimate new member of the ballroom dancing club at her host university. She perceived that her participation in this club gave her access to roles and interactions that she felt greatly enhanced her understanding of social norms and role-based obligations considered important within the hierarchical structure of the club. As a new member of a university ballroom dancing club of 80 members in which she was initially the only foreigner, she saw her ability to recognize and use addressee honorifics as a distinct asset in enacting her status as a "junior member" of the club and as "foreigner". In the former role, she saw her ability to convey politeness as crucial to managing upward communication in line with communicative norms within this kind of community of practice. She reported that "it was very easy to talk to higher ups", which she saw as particularly convenient given that she was located at the bottom of the hierarchy as a new member. In the latter role, Annika saw her ability to adopt politeness norms as a resource for differentiating herself from other foreigners who were perceived as less adept and thus less close to normative expectations and the cohesive bonds of the group.

> …I felt that the fact that a lot of Asian students from Korea and China compared to people from America and UK…used to do the, the casual form and that kind of stereotype forming around them that they don't know how to use *keigo*… it was a popular one….Then later on I remember, like, two Chinese girls joining in and they couldn't particularly use *keigo* and some, like, people came to me like, "Why can you? Why can no one ... why can't they use *keigo* to us?" Like, so strange.

Annika welcomed this recognition that her attempts to use *keigo* in line with established politeness norms were received favourably, as she saw that this opened up a lot of opportunities for meaningful bonding. She felt that "in general they kind of felt much closer to me than, than before, than any other international person. As I said, they, they found me very, like, "Oh, she's

not as different as much us so ...". For Annika, thus, the process of deepening interpersonal connections and establishing herself as a legitimate group member was achieved primarily through expressing solidarity with the group by making efforts to synchronize her behaviors and use of addressee and referent honorifics with those of other junior Japanese members. She expressed that this had been an agentive decision on her part -- one which led to a subjective sense of having successfully integrated with and been accepted by peers. Annika specifically remarked that such integration had been important to her – she was driven to have intimate contact based on her conviction that "people are not that much different as we perceive them to be". She saw Japan as a heavily stereotyped country in the West, and she felt that the ability to discern stereotypes from reality that she had honed during her 3.5 years in the UK gave her a distinct advantage. Annika was aware that many students on study abroad have trouble integrating into Japanese social circles, so she was committed to demonstrating to her Japanese club friends that "foreigners" are not that different from them and that "they can also live by your norms". In this sense, for Annika, enacting politeness in line with existing norms of interaction within the club was an agentive act linked to her ideological stance vis-à-vis intercultural differences. She saw politeness as a resource for deepening relations and achieving this aim, and her sense of having succeeded further strengthened her sense of the importance of addressee and referent honorifics.

In perceiving her new social relationships and the role of politeness in enacting these relationships, she specifically avoided associating politeness with "distance" and informal language with "closeness", which she saw as an English-language based view of the world. From her experiences of living in England, she had formed the perception that English words like "please" and "thank you" don't necessarily embody a sense of "care". Rather, she perceived affinities between the function of politeness in Japanese and her native language of Russian.

> In Russian we show kind of respect and care with politeness…In that sense Japan was much closer to me because I felt like I could express my care through being, like, through being not formal, you know, but through being respectful. And that was only, like, natural respect for me.

Annika imbued Japanese politeness practices with a sense of cultural meaningfulness imported

from her perceptions of politeness in Russian. She also saw the use of politeness as a more significant activity than just following the norms. She saw politeness in particular as a way of externalizing a personal sense of appreciation for those senior to her in the club that had accepted her and helped her with many things. She explained: Although you are obligated to use it because of your position, you should, as a *kōhai* (junior), you should speak to your *sempai* (senior) with *keigo* and have a more personal meaning". For her, personal meaningfulness meant that being polite in L2 Japanese was much more than following linguistic scripts – it became closely associated with the idea of expressing her indebtedness to others for helping her and accepting her as a club member.

On the whole, Annika saw that her engagement in club activities allowed her to appropriate existing politeness practices used to symbolize vertical and horizontal distance as a resource for making interpersonal connections and fulfilling her roles in the club, whilst imbuing these practices with personalized meanings, intentions and affective significance. She, thus, made connections between the politeness practices of her existing languages of Russian and English and her emerging understandings of Japanese, based on a perspective in which each language needs to be understood in relation to the underlying logic of situations and broader cultural expectations.

Viktoria's account

Viktoria also arrived in Japan with upper-elementary level Japanese, including basic use of honorifics, but she recalled experiencing increased awareness of sociolinguistic distinctions within the Japanese language 2-3 months after arrival in Japan, primarily in terms of growing awareness of informal language use (i.e., plain forms). Her exposure to informal speaking and writing in her Japanese classes had been limited, which led her to experience a gap between the informal language that she gradually became able to understand and what she could actually produce. She explained that:

> We don't really cover informal speaking, so I wasn't as trained in that. And then I got really comfortable using that, but also my listening skills, I felt like, you know, like a dog, I could understand everything even though probably I couldn't say as much as I could understand…

When asked whether she noticed herself speaking in a more polite way than those around her, she commented: "Yes and no, I guess, because I think in Japan when you first meet a person everyone is polite anyways". Interestingly, however, Viktoria recalls that her friends would positively comment on her comparatively polite language use.

> And then yes, my friends would be like, 'Oh, you're such a good girl, you're so cultured, you're always so polite, the young people nowadays they're not polite, but you're so polite.' And I would be like, 'It's not because I'm a good person, it's because I was taught, taught like this.'

As can be seen in this comment, the use of polite language contributed to an impression amongst her friends that did not necessarily concord with her view of self or intended identity projection. Here, thus, she negotiates her own positioning by rejecting the attribution of being a polite person and emphasizing that she is simply following a pedagogical script. This was a critical learning experience for Viktoria, as discussions with friends complexified her understandings of L2 Japanese politeness.

> But then I learnt things from them because I guess sometimes it makes people uncomfortable as well…[w]hen you're so polite with them. Because it was explained at least by my friends and tutors, the Japanese ones, that if you're too polite you are kind of letting the person know that you're not as close.

Viktoria came to understand that use of addressee honorifics could actually create distance between people, thus representing a decoupling of "polite forms" and "politeness" (Liddicoat & McConachy, 2019). She then decided to experiment with more informal language: "I didn't want to offend people, so I tried to adapt and then it's just easier to speak in informal language anyways, it's faster". In this sense, she experienced a language-related identity tension which she attempted to solve by broadening her speech-style repertoire to allow for the construction of an identity position more in line with her desired self-image.

Viktoria's relationship with speech styles was somewhat different in professional contexts such as her part time job at a bar, where referent honorifics (*keigo*) were particularly important for

enacting the role of service provider. She understood the need to elevate her language beyond *desu/masu* forms: "At least as a Japanese language student, I thought that I might as well address clients in the proper way that they would've expected". Nevertheless, she also commented that Japanese customers would often express surprise at her use of *keigo*, which she interpreted as relating to her status as a Westerner: "…well, if you speak in *keigo* to a Japanese person as a Western person, they get super shocked but also super flattered." This parallel's Iwasaki's (2011) findings that learners in her study reported feeling that lower expectations were applied to them due to their perceived status as white native English speakers, which can often lead to surprise when learners use Japanese in nativelike ways. Viktoria reported that when she would use referent honorifics as normally expected in Japanese customer-service discourse, customers would either talk to her as if she was a child, respond to her in English, or respond with completely normal (and fast) Japanese. Thus, Viktoria, again experienced a sense of dissonance when her attempts to conform to what she thought were the expected politeness norms were met with unexpected reactions. Interestingly, however, when asked about her preferred response, she commented that: "I think somewhere in between a child and a Japanese person…. Because it would still be easier for me, it would, if they would've spoken more slowly." Overall, Viktoria's learning of L2 Japanese politeness was characterized by attempts to respect existing politeness norms whilst still attempting to present herself as a social actor on her own terms by bringing language use in line with her own goals of forming interpersonal connections, expressing her own identity, and enacting roles in an appropriate yet comfortable fashion.

Joseph's account

Joseph was one participant who consciously recognized that his experiences of communicating in Japanese during study abroad contributed to enhanced sensitivity towards the dynamic construction of politeness and deeper understanding of the symbolic meanings that politeness practices have in different contexts. He specifically saw deeper understanding as being triggered by growing observations about the use of speech styles that contrasted with the relatively static notions of politeness common in Japanese language textbooks. Indeed, one of his key observations was that speech styles would not necessarily be consistent within an interaction amongst the same participants. Joseph observed that even in some contexts where young people had just met each other, there would be a mixture of speech styles.

> …I would notice that at the start of the conversation, well when they first meet,…everyone makes sure that they're polite and they are respectful to each other straight away. And then once they are comfortable and they kind of see each other out, then they know they can kind of like drop to a particular level where they can talk more informally. It made me realise that they are more, they are very aware of each other, if that makes sense. They need to make sure that everyone's comfortable first, and then, when they can see an opportunity, then they'll switch.

This observation challenged the assumption that use of speech styles is determined by participant relations, which then enhanced Joseph's sensitivity to the interactive monitoring that goes on in Japanese conversation and the fact that participants use speech styles as interactional resources (Cook, 1998). In other words, he came to see that switching between speech styles was a normal phenomenon that represented individuals' attempts to create meanings within particular moments of interaction. He saw the interactive monitoring he observed as less of a requirement in English interaction "because it doesn't distinguish so many levels of formality". Joseph also developed a sense that formality was not just a feature of language but a feature of behavior within contexts that emphasize notions of hierarchy and respect. Similar to Annika, Joseph's participation in *bukatsu* – specifically in the *iaidō* (Japanese sword arts) club – was a source of rich learning in terms of understanding the ways that individuals use linguistic and non-linguistic rituals to enact formality within their roles as group members (Ide, 2006). He saw formal language (e.g., referent honorifics) as closely associated with "reverence" for group members more senior than oneself, particularly those at the top of the hierarchy. However, he was also struck by the humility of those who were treated as revered members in the group, as experienced particularly acutely on his first day of training.

> So for example in *iaidō*, the person who I spoke to the most initially, was actually the leader of it. I didn't know that initially going in and um, so he helped me in terms of changing and so forth, and it was only when I came out and we started the session, how everyone reacted to him and the kind of Japanese they used towards him, I was like 'Oh right' <laughter >.

In comparing the situation to university clubs in the UK, he perceived that "[t]here's a different

dynamic to it in Japanese culture, there's a lot more reverence for it". He noted that there was a very distinct switch to being formal as soon as training began, which he saw as indicating seriousness. Conversely, he felt that such a stark attitudinal shift would be unusual in his university in the UK, where familiarity and friendliness amongst participants would be likely to dominate even in an instructional setting. Thus, his experience of participating in *iaidō* training led him to recognize formality and interpret it as meaningful within a distinct context informed by a broader cultural perspective in which formality is particularly valued. This contextual perspective on the significance of politeness practices played a key role in moving beyond rules of thumb. He also saw that this experience had helped him develop a new sensibility which he took with him back to the UK and which he felt contributed to an enhancement of his identity. Specifically, he felt that he had become more "thoughtful" about what and how he says things to people in a way that went beyond understanding of rules for communication. However, he experienced that his increased awareness of the embeddedness of communicative practices within structures of social relations made him more sensitive in ways that brought about conflicting emotions. Although Joseph was able to successfully reconnect with his local friends in the UK, he reported "missing" the "way of communicating with Japanese students". In fact, Joseph's return to the UK led him to romanticize his interactions in Japan as comparatively "pure".

> I don't know if it was more because I was a foreign student over there, they were more interested in me, so kind of have that communication was more easy, just, over here, in Western culture, friends kind of tend to speak to each other that's kind of like degrading if that makes sense?... So insult each other type of thing. A lot of times I'm like, you're supposed to be friends, why would you kind of like say that kind of thing to each other. Even though it's in a joking manner, it still kind of gets to me. But um…, all my conversations and stuff I had over there was very, it was very pure.

Joseph's experiences of constructing interpersonal relations through L2 Japanese, particularly in the formal environment of the *iaidō* club, had brought into heightened salience the contrastive nature of the banter that had previously been normal within his friendship group in the UK. What was previously familiar and comfortable had now become strange, evoking unexpected aversion in him. He had come to adopt an outsider perspective on the communicative practices within his friendship group, creating a contrast between "Japanese

culture" and "Western culture" and using moral metaphors (purity/sanctity vs. degrading) to deal with the dissonance he experienced. Thus, whilst Joseph's understanding of politeness practices took on a more interlingual and intercultural nature, it was accompanied by shifts in perspectives that created a certain sense of alienation as he attempted to reconnect with his friends in the UK.

Alex's account

Although Alex had been studying Japanese for just over two years when he arrived in Japan, he reported some confidence issues with the use of his own Japanese after arriving. In terms of politeness, his understanding in the early days conformed to the basic rule-of-thumb distinction between plain forms and *desu/masu* forms which he had been taught in the UK and Japanese language classes in Japan. Compared to the other participants in this study, Alex reported that many of his interactions in Japanese took place with strangers that he spoke with in restaurants or people who approached him for conversation. This diversity of interlocutors and the impromptu, informal nature of many of the interactions led him to not only develop his confidence in handling unplanned interaction but also to derive particular insights about the use of speech styles. One of his main insights was that it is possible to be more polite or less polite even within each of these two main speech styles. Alex observed that "…even within casual situations and speaking in plain form, there were still certain instances with…this kind of social hierarchy". This is a slightly different initial insight to Joseph, whose observation related to variability in speech style usage amongst the same speakers. Alex also came to realise that the plain form does not necessarily imply a lack of respect, an insight that he gained when elderly Japanese people would use the plain form with him in response to his use of *desu/masu* forms.

> But then [on] certain occasions…I've encountered some elderly person who would be speaking to me and then speaking to them in polite form…[a]nd then maybe they speak back to me in plain form…

Alex had a parallel insight with regard to his own language use in informal settings, particularly in interactions in drinking establishments. Although he was aware of the importance of age-based social distinctions, he felt that the informality of such contexts mitigated the need to strictly adhere to rules of thumb for polite language.

> Well, a lot of people I've spoken to were older than me anyway and just…even in those kinds of situations there were certain times when I felt like not compelled to be respectful and use polite form or things like that…

Such experiences led Alex to sense that the use of plain forms itself does not necessarily imply disregard for social distinctions. He came to incorporate into his understanding of politeness an embodied sense that language forms can be put to use in ways that diverge from convention in order to reflect the appropriate mood amongst individuals. Similar to Joseph, he came to see Japanese politeness as extremely "dynamic" in ways that "don't exist in English". This contributed to a relativistic understanding that prompted him to think about the gaps between languages and the difficulties they can pose to L2 users. Although Alex had studied Spanish and French in high school, he noticed a particularly large difference between English and Japanese compared to the differences between these languages and English.

> So, these, differences I can observe definitely changed my perspective on communication and things about English which I'd never sort of thought about before. While they don't necessary impact me, it sort of helps me understand things about English. For example, why certain things are really difficult for foreigners to grasp….

Interestingly, the intense engagement with Japanese led to a reflexive language awareness that made him more attuned to the nature of English language use and the potential issues that L2 English speakers might face. Thus, Alex uses his own reflections on linguistic distance and sociocultural language conventions to take up multiple perspectives on the experience of self and others. He saw his enhanced sensitivity to language as potentially transferable to new contexts as well, particularly in terms of paying attention to the use of language to mark (or not mark) social hierarchy. He also reported increased ability to notice variability in behavioural routines across different social and regional contexts within Japan, which helped him to more objectively reflect on observed differences, both in Japan and back in the UK.

> It's very much helped me to, allowed me to notice more of these changes since I've been back. Especially and, well ... not in a good or bad way but just in a more objective way…you know, more like just as an observer seeing these differences, and while some

> I prefer, and some of the other side I prefer, I see these differences. And it's helped me to, you know, sort of reflect on myself I suppose. And, being a foreign languages learner and having this Japanese competency now, has changed me for the better, I think.

Like Joseph, Alex's ability to make more nuanced comparisons within and across cultures has been experienced as part of an expansion of his ability as a sensitive intercultural communicator and a better person. The fact that so many of his interpersonal interactions took place in informal contexts provided opportunities for him to observe the potential for plain forms to create positive rapport amongst individuals who were not necessarily intimates in the strict sense of the word. Similar to other participants in this study, Alex came to see communicative setting as a major variable that generated possibilities for using speech styles that went beyond the stereotypical mappings with age-based or status-based hierarchy.

Discussion

Learners' accounts provide insights into the context-sensitive and highly personalised ways that language learners make sense of L2 politeness forms and practices. All learners reported an increased sensitivity to the dynamic and context-sensitive use of speech styles that helped broaden their perspectives on the role that politeness plays in marking and constructing social relationships (Liddicoat & McConachy, 2019). An important insight from the data is that learners' emerging understandings of politeness were closely related to their own relational goals and experiences, observations about the situated nature of how politeness is constructed through speech styles, and a desire to adopt L2 politeness practices that indexed or enhanced their existing self-image. This meant that each learner oriented towards the three main speech styles associated with Japanese politeness in different ways.

Annika ascribed much value to referent honorifics within the context of her desire to accommodate to norms of politeness within the ballroom dancing club and to prove to her Japanese club mates that foreigners could indeed successfully function within the framework of their social relations. For Viktoria, however, the ability to use plain forms was experienced as particularly important in order to relate to same-aged peers without her use of speech styles standing out as "polite" relative to peers. Conversely, in the professional domain, she endeavoured to use referent honorifics in order to enact her customer-service role in the pub according to established norms in this context. Thus, although both Annika and Viktoria

emphasized convergence on L2 norms, this decision was associated with their own desire to use the politeness practices salient in their main relational spheres to build meaningful interpersonal connections. Emerging awareness of the distinctions between speech styles and the ways they are used in context was a crucial resource for enhancing access to broader social participation and identity construction. For both Joseph and Alex, growing awareness of the ways that speakers put speech styles to use to actively create meanings based on attentiveness to the dynamics of the social context was a catalyst for reflecting on the nature of social relations from an interlingual and intercultural perspective. Joseph's experience of politeness rituals in the Japanese sword arts club led him to develop a respect for formality that he then felt to be missing in his interactions upon returning to the UK. Meanwhile, for Alex, increased awareness of L2 Japanese politeness practices prompted him to make cross-linguistic comparisons with English, Spanish and French from the perspective of how these languages mark social distinctions. This translated into insights about the kinds of difficulties that might be encountered by learners of English and a sense of identity expansion and having become a better person.

Each of the participants had the opportunity to observe natural language use in communicative contexts where they sought to expand the potential for their own participation and form meaningful interpersonal connections. Their observations about politeness in context served to challenge their existing understandings of the relationships between speech styles and politeness and to see speech styles as resources for meaning making (Cook, 2008). This is not to say that learners have come to adopt an "anything goes" view of speech styles, but rather that they are more attuned to the fact speech styles are a resource not only for enacting the cultural meanings and social distinctions that are valued in different communicative settings or communities of practice but also for enacting the meanings of individuals who have their own communicative purposes and intentions. This more complex perspective which incorporates appreciation for both structure and agency is essential for formulating more nuanced interlingual and intercultural comparisons and considering the different ways that culturally situated notions about social relationships are constructed, maintained, or challenged through linguistic decision-making (Liddicoat & McConachy, 2019). As learners come to interpret politeness practices in more nuanced ways, they also consider the significance of their own linguistic choices and create possibilities for exercising their own agency as language users.

Implications and conclusion

In incorporating an intercultural perspective into Japanese language pedagogy, we argue for the importance of making consideration of learners' potential relational goals more central to decision making about how politeness is taught. This includes the need for increased recognition of the ways that different speech styles constitute a resource for learners as they attempt to position themselves as legitimate social actors through the medium of the L2. In particular, there is an urgent need to challenge the myth that being able to speak politely with addressee honorifics is sufficient for speakers of L2 Japanese, especially those who will study abroad. As previously reported (e.g., Iwasaki, 2011) and also observed here, plain forms can also play a key role in developing friendships during study abroad with same-aged peers as they index closeness and solidarity and, in fact, rigid adherence to "over polite" language may create a sense of alienation and thwart relational goals.

We argue that the teaching of L2 politeness needs to encourage deeper interpretative engagement whereby learners are actively encouraged to explore the phenomenon of politeness within and across the languages in their communicative repertoire from the perspective of how politeness choices reflect and impact on interpersonal relationships. This includes consideration of how assumptions about the importance of different dimensions of interpersonal relationships – particularly hierarchical distinctions and in-group/out-group relations – impact on the choices that speakers make. Learners will inevitably bring their own frames of reference and stock of assumptions to these issues which have been shaped by their socialization and communicative experiences in different languages. Thus, rather than a singular pedagogical focus on what the norms are, we advocate that the learners' reflexive exploration of their own perceptions, identities, and relational agendas be integrated into pedagogy.

Participants' accounts of learning to negotiate politeness practices within the context of forming new interpersonal connections, such as the data included in this paper, can be useful material for Japanese language classes that aim to raise learners' awareness of the highly personal and context-sensitive process that is learning politeness in a second language. It is this deeper engagement that is facilitative of the development of intercultural understanding as a long-term educational goal, through enhancing learners' capacities as active interpreters of

communication who can use processes of noticing, reflecting, and comparing to develop intercultural insights (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; McConachy, 2018).

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