

Japanese Students' Personal Requirements for Interaction in English With Foreign Students, Examined by Free Description

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine which factors (such as motivation, interest, language ability or context) lead Japanese university students to interact in English with Foreign university students. The study targeted 128 Japanese undergraduate university students, executing a survey as research method to gather data about their preferences, experiences, and expectations towards interaction with international students in English. Further, specific questions aimed to collect information about the ideal non-classroom interaction situation. Content Analysis method (内容分析) was applied, and the answers were finally grouped in five main categories: Individuality (1 on 1 interaction), External Physical approach, Motivation, and interest (to interact), 'Adequate' place and time and 'Adequate' Language Ability. Interpretation of the data allows us to say that the students' requirements and beliefs sometimes work as limitations or barriers for interaction. It is also apparent that the respondents tend to wait external initiative to engage in an interaction and might wait for a particular context or situation until they participate in one. Another factor is the self-perception of their language ability, fearing possible communication issue or improper use of the language. Such judgment, however, may not correspond with the actual language competence of the students. Emotional factors like motivation, interest, self-perception, and confidence, appear to affect their willingness to communicate, even if their language ability is adequate. In addition, the findings not only allow us to pinpoint these preferences, but also let us provide suggestions for a smoother interaction in English.

Keywords: English Interaction, Japanese Students, International Students, Intercultural Interaction, Personal Requirements, Preferences

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Introduction

Our ability to create and sustain our social world depends in how well we communicate (Wiemann, 2003). It is also well-known that, to achieve more effective communication, a competent use of a language is necessary.

English language is currently the *lingua franca* (common language for communication) of the world. It is also acknowledgeable that English-language skills are required to compete in the global economy. However, in a study made in 2019 for the EF English Proficiency Index, Japan was ranked 53rd in the world for English proficiency, placing it squarely in the “low proficiency” category. Despite the current efforts made by Japan's Ministry of Education and changes in the English educational curriculum in schools, Japan ranks near the bottom of Asian and developed countries alike (EF English Proficiency Index, 2020). One aspect of this situation we would like to touch on is whether Japanese university students, when their instruction in English can reasonably be considered completed (after finishing high school), see themselves in an interaction in English, not in the classroom environment but outside any educational setting and which factors do they consider for this perception.

In previous studies, factors for interaction in a foreign language were examined inside the classroom or in specific academic context. Interaction in English outside the classroom was addressed in the context of study abroad (Tanaka K., 2007) or, closer to our concern, in Japan in an attempt to provide a measurement of learner's environment (Lee, et al. 2011). In a different way, we want to question the conditions under which students considered or are considering interaction in English with foreign interlocutors, with the idea, as Maftoon and Ziafar (2013) suggested, of shedding light on factors usually left in the shadows: “Classroom interactional patterns depend on some contextual, cultural, and local factors in addition to the methodologies employed in the classroom. (...) Research needs to shift from the observable to the unobservable like (...) learners' psychological states and cultural backgrounds” (P.74).

The perspective Japanese students have towards the foreign language and their users also needs to be considered. Hamilton (2017) pointed that there is a deep-rooted ambivalence most Japanese still feel towards foreigners and foreign cultures. So, to achieve a substantial improvement in this state of affairs (neglecting to use English), a parallel and progressive change in the Japanese cultural psyche towards the foreign language and people, should take place.

In this line of thought, the present research sought to obtain more information about students' perspective on English interaction outside the classroom by seeking to identify Japanese students' requirements for engaging in interaction with foreigners in English.

Methodology

A mixed method, mainly qualitative, with use of quantitative tools as support, was used in this study. We mainly took in consideration, as base elements: (a) Undergraduate Japanese University students (b) Interaction in English (c) International students. The research was conducted between May and July of 2021. An online questionnaire was assessed. The participants for this study were 128 Japanese undergraduate university students, 88 females and 35 males, between 18 and 21 years old (data obtained from the first question of the questionnaire). The questionnaire items (Q 2,3,4) were elaborated considering that so far, the majority of the previous research addresses interaction in Foreign Language mainly as in-

classroom interaction (Littlewood and Yu, 2011; Tuan and Nhu, 2010; Rashidi and Rafieerad, 2010), Nabei, 2005; etc) , aiming to obtain more information about interaction in more informal contexts, or non-academic ones, considering that context is an important factor in social interaction, and most of this is done outside academic premises (Liem, G. A. D., Ginns, P., Martin, A. J., Stone, B., & Herrett, M. (2012).

This short questionnaire had as main purpose gathering information from Japanese students related to existence/viability of interaction in English with International students. It has 4 main questions, gathering data related to: (1) Their personal information (age, nationality, gender, year of instruction); (2) Experience interacting with international students (IS) in Japan in English (yes/no); (3) Situation and reason (if they had experience interacting with IS); (4) Personal opinion about Ideal circumstances for interaction in English. The questionnaire was written (reviewed by native speakers) in Japanese, so that the respondents felt more comfortable and could provide more honest/precise answers.

After gathering the information, the answers were carefully translated to English, processed (word counting) by KH coder software, pre-categorized by circumstance/topic and then categorized in a theoretical model, through Content Analysis method (内容分析). KH software was used to count the most common used words, according to their frequency of their occurrence, to have a quantitative reference for the pre-category formation. As a result, a word table (Word frequency chart) was obtained (Figure 1a, 2a, 3a in Results.) After obtaining this selection, the words were analyzed in their context (participant's answers) and pre-categorized through Content Analysis method (used to reach a consensus on qualitative data and the names of the pre-categories) for further interpretation, as showed in the figures 1b, 2b, 3b (Results). From this point, thematic/circumstantial pre-categories were classified, also through Content Analysis method, establishing the final categories of theoretical model (Figure 4).

Conclusions

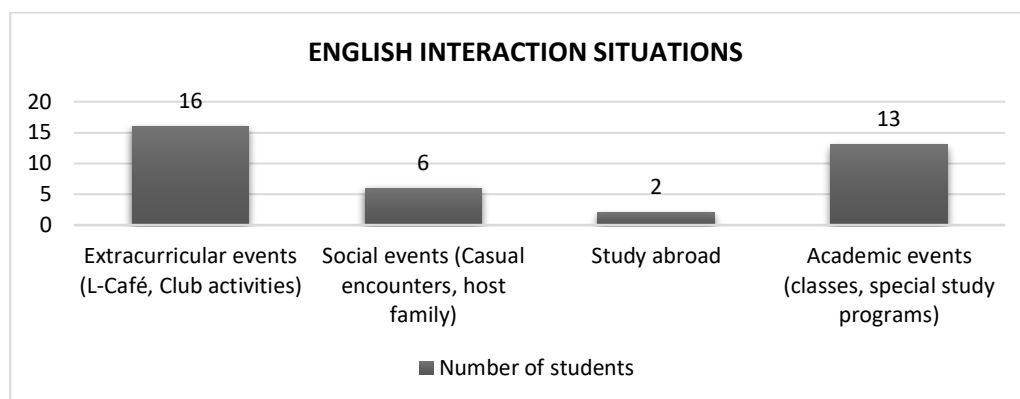
Results

Regarding question (Q2): “Do you have any experience interacting in English with international students in Japan? (あなたは、日本で留学生と英語で対話した経験がありますか)”, the results showed that the vast majority (71%, 91 Japanese students) had not had an interaction in English with International students so far. Only 37 people (29%) had had one or more.

For the respondents who already had experienced an interaction in English with International students, question 3 was asked: Q3: If you answered "1. Yes" to Q2, please tell us: a. Situation and b. Reason or trigger. (問2で「1.ある」と答えた方にお聞きします。a.それはどのような状況でしたか? b.その理由やきっかけは、どのようなものでしたか?). Frequent word chart was elaborated using KH coder (Figure 1A and 2A) and then answers were divided by **Situation** (Figure 1B) (Total answers: 37; SD: 6,40; M: 9,25) and **Reason** (Figure 2B) (Total: 37; SD:10.50; M:12.33), using Content Analysis.

Frequent word(s)	(Pre)Category	Frequent word(s)	(Pre)Category
L-Café	Extracurricular event	School	Academic event
Club (activities)	Extracurricular event	(he/she) talked to me	Social Event
Host family	Social Event	Casual/small talk	Social Event
Class/lesson/study	Academic event	Overseas/abroad	Study abroad

Figure 1A: Frequent words (pre)category chart (English Interaction situations)

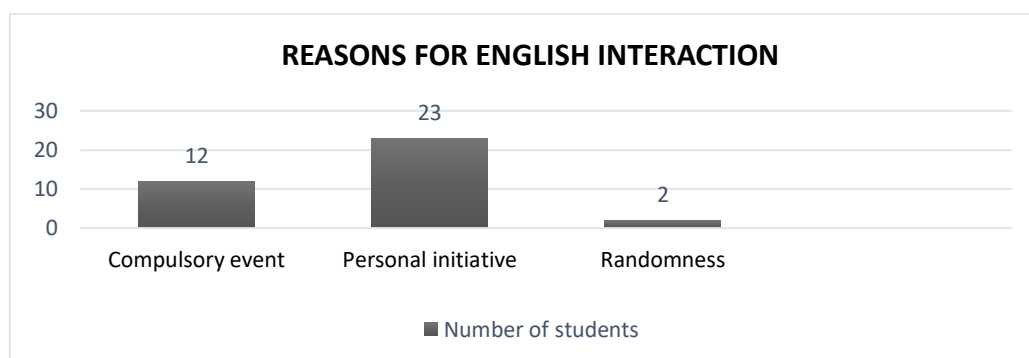


Total answers: 37 SD: 6.40 Mean: 9.25

Figure 1B: English interaction Situations (categorized)

Frequent word(s)	(Pre)Category	Frequent word(s)	(Pre)Category
(I) wanted to (voluntary approach)	Personal Initiative	Improve (language skill)	Personal Initiative
Physical proximity	Personal Initiative	(I) had to	Compulsory event
Host family	Personal Initiative	(he/she) talked to me	Compulsory event
Class/lesson/study	Compulsory event	Overseas/abroad	Personal Initiative
School	Compulsory event	Other (random/no particular reason)	Randomness

Figure 2A: Frequent words categorized chart (English Interaction reasons)



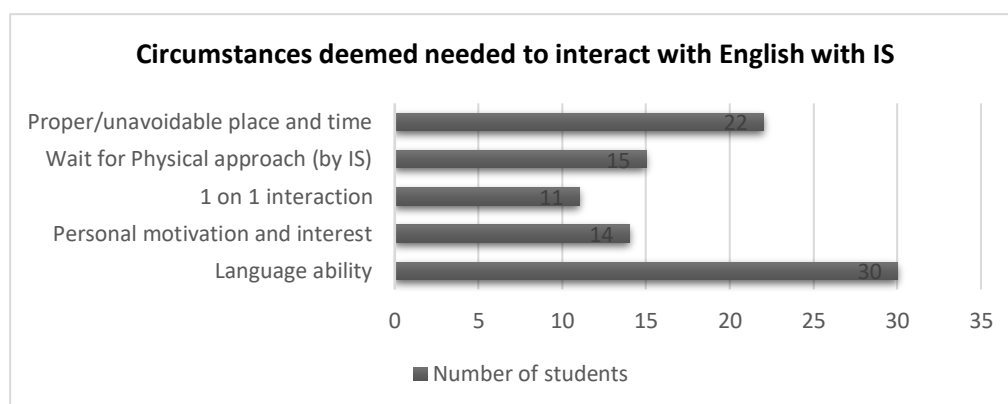
Total: 37; SD:10.50; M:12.33

Figure 2B: Reasons for English Interaction (categorized)

For the respondents who had not had an interaction in English with International students, question 4 was asked: Q4: If you answered "2. No" to Q2, please tell us under what circumstances, if any, would you be willing to have a dialogue in English with a foreign student? (どうしたら/どうすれば/どうなれば/どんな状況であれば、留学生と英語で対話しますか?). Words were counted (KH Coder) and **categorized** (Content Analysis method). (Figure 3A) and answers were grouped and by topic as well (Figure 3B) (Content Analysis method) (**Total: 92 answers; SD:7.64; M:18.40**)

Frequent word(s)	(Pre)Category (circumstances)	Frequent word(s)	(Pre)Category (circumstances)
He/she speaks to me	Wait for physical approach	I have enough (English) skills	(English) Language ability
Physical proximity	Wait for physical approach	If I am supported by other in the same space	Proper/unavoidable place and/or time (context)
(same) class	Proper/unavoidable place and/or time (context)	I am interested in	Personal motivation and interest
(same) activity	Proper/unavoidable place and/or time (context)	I feel confident in my English skills	(English) Language ability
We are alone (only us) /	1 on 1 interaction	Nobody else around us	1 on 1 interaction
I want to	Personal motivation and interest	Incoming chance/opportunity	Wait for physical approach
no pressure from other people	1 on 1 interaction	If I must	Proper/unavoidable place and/or time (context)

Figure 3A: Frequent words category chart



Total: 92 answers; SD:7.64; M:18.40

Figure 3B: Circumstances deemed needed to interact with English with International Students (IS) (categorized)

Implications (Discussion)

After reviewing the answers from the questionnaire, common denominators are noticeable between Japanese students who had already interacted with international students and those who had not yet had this kind of interaction. Both the context and the reasons stipulated by those with interaction experience are consistent with the expectations of those who had not yet interacted with IS. Under this view, contexts and reasons can be grouped together, and final categories were organized in a theoretical model as follows:

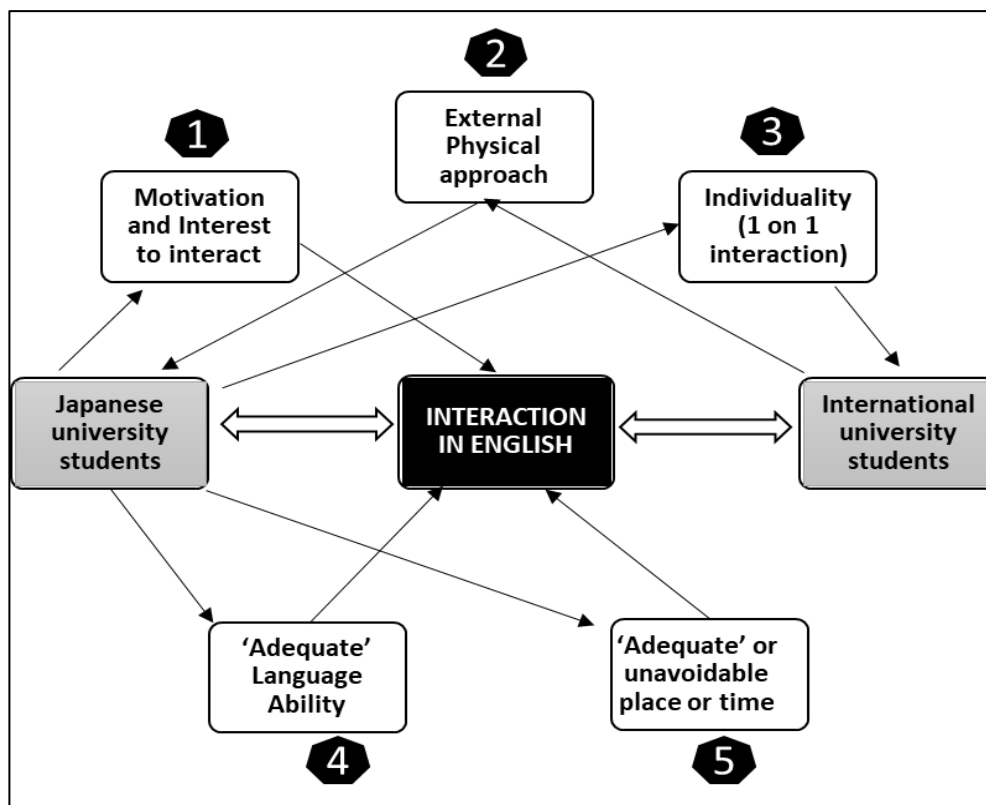


Figure 4. Theoretical model – “Japanese students' requirements for interaction in English”

Any interaction has internal and external factors that affect it. In the present study, regarding the requirements or preferred particularities of Japanese students to interact in English with foreign students, 5 main assumptions (connected by numbers 1 to 5 at the Fig.4), derived from the final categories, can be made pertaining to such internal and external factors:

1) Most of the respondents require (intrinsic or extrinsic) motivation and personal interest to interact in English with International students (交流への意欲・関心)

Affective factors are almost always a condition in learning and social experiences. Many Japanese people are not keen to learn or use English for interaction. In the early 1980s a governmental poll revealed the astonishing statistic that 64% of Japanese people questioned, declared that they did not wish to have any association with foreigners and had no intention of ever doing so. Of the 25% who did express a desire to associate with foreign people, fewer than a sixth, or 40% of the total sample, were doing so (Hamilton, 2004). Thus, perspective, personal interest and both internal and external motivation might play a key role in the willingness to communicate in English. This also may help to reduce the Affective Filter (Krashen, 1981) which normally generates resistance to the experience and smoothen the communication

process, as previously seen in Stevik (1976), who also reinforces the idea that learners with negative attitudes towards second language acquisition or interaction will have a high socio-affective filter, will fail to process the ideas or contents behind the message transmitted, even if they could understand them.

2) Most of the respondents will wait for foreign students to approach them and start interacting in English. (相手からの物理的なアプローチ)

According to the data, a good number of students will wait for the counterpart (International Students) to approach and won't take the initiative to start the interaction. While this could be seen as a passive role or posture from the part of the Japanese students, cultural factors might be playing a role from a Japanese point of view, avoidance of initiation might be a matter of pertinence and convenience, as well as valuation of silence (Nakai, 2002) and non-verbal communication (Ruch, 1984) in interaction.

3) Most of the respondents prefer to have 1-on-1 interaction in English with International students (1対1の対話)

Japanese students would prefer to have one-on-one conversations in English with International students, rather than conversations in larger groups, because this reduces the impact of mistakes on their self-confidence.

Additionally, for many Japanese, self-blaming and shame (haji) are the root of virtue and who is sensitive to it might be seen as a virtuous person (Benedict, 1946). In the present study, respondents might avoid public embarrassment in preferring 1-on-1 interaction: *"only us, if possible, since I am shy in front of others, because of my limited English"*, said a female student. At this stage of the analysis however, it is not clear whether avoidance of initiation is a manifestation of modesty or just insecurity.

4) Most of the respondents will interact in English only if they have (or think they have) a 'proper' (English) language ability to do it. 適正言語能力 (現実的または知覚的)

There are two factors to consider in this part. On the one hand, the actual level of competence in the use of English of Japanese students, and on the other hand, the self-perception that they might have about it. While there are many students who need to work on and develop more linguistic aspects such as vocabulary and conversational skills, there is a group that will not be able to interact just because they think/believe they cannot do it, regardless of their level of competence or preparation. Emotional factors like self-esteem and confidence; social factors like shyness and communication style; and cultural factors like prudentialism and humbleness might play a role here (see previous factor).

5) Most of the respondents will interact in English only if they feel that the context (time, place, opportunity) is right (or demands it). 適切な、または避けられない場所や時間

Again, emotional factors, especially perception of context, might play an important role in this aspect. Some Japanese students may only interact if *"the situation allows/demands it"*, as one of the female students answered in the questionnaire.

Places like classroom, official events, club activity's locations, language café, known environments and controlled situation allow many of them to feel safer to interact, or in some cases, they 'wouldn't have other option than do it', as quoted by a male student from the group. This last statement has apparent relation with the assumption number 2 above, which establishes that Japanese students will wait an approach to engage in the interaction. Sometimes, Japanese students might be moved by compulsoriness, rather than personal initiative, which might show their motivation as merely an instrumental factor (Oura and Tada, 1978).

Limitations of the study

Although the survey conducted allowed us to know more about tendencies and requirements of Japanese university students regarding Interaction in English with International students, this is a limited perspective that reflects the reality of this group. The participants were mostly freshmen and second year students, and their in-campus academic life have been affected and limited due to COVID-19 pandemic. This also limits the opportunities of the Japanese students to interact with international students, since their entry to Japan is currently restricted. Additionally, their answer may only reflect their estimation or image, based in previous experience, due to the limited opportunities for interaction or encounter with international students nowadays. We need to also take in consideration the fact that the answers were translated from their original language (Japanese) for an easier analysis and presentation of results (In English). The categories were created based in this interpretation of the data. We would like to use the created categories, both the English and Japanese denominations, in future related extended studies.

Generalizing the results is not possible yet, since there is evidence that other influencing factors/requirements to be considered have not fully appeared in the answers. Further research is required to evaluate the degree of influence of the above and other factors on Interaction in English. It would be helpful as well to know the point of view of International Students, as they might have a comparable experience using Japanese language to interact with Japanese people.

Final notes and recommendations

It is coherent to say that, along with other external factors, Japanese student's personal requirements (expectations) to establish interaction is more related to personal convictions. Self-perception of their language ability, the sense of comfortability and safety, and their own self-esteem and confidence are playing important roles in their attitude towards English language learning, in the first place, and Interaction in English Language, in second place. Social, cultural, and personal circumstances that shaped their way of thinking are also influencing their motivation to use English outside the classroom. Knowing that English Education in Japan still focuses mostly on grammar, vocabulary and formal aspects of the language, a specialized program and a reform of the current curriculum might help to change the current perspective towards the foreign language and help to support students' sense of confidence towards the use of English in interaction.

As we pointed at the beginning of this article, English is the world's lingua franca and it is necessary not only for international communication, but for a wider intercultural (and even intracultural) understanding. Foreign language learning, development, and improvement in practical use, take place frequently outside the walls of a classroom. It requires a conscious

effort (Beames, Higgins and Nicol, 2011), and a dedicated time of extramural practice, since that time and both the level of oral proficiency, and the size of the vocabulary, have positive and significant correlation (Sundqvist, 2011). We would like to play our role and use the knowledge obtained (and to be obtained) to improve the interaction context in English for Japanese in the near future.

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