

Japanese as a Lingua Franca: Exploring Communication Dynamics and Pedagogical Insights for L1 Speakers

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Abstract

Lingua franca (LF) communication research is critical to addressing the challenges and opportunities posed by our increasingly interconnected and linguistically diverse world. English is at the forefront of LF scenarios owing to its global prevalence and international significance. In contrast, Japanese as a lingua franca (JLF) has a different dynamic, unfolding primarily within specific communities and contexts. For example, internationalization efforts in Japan's higher education institutions have given rise to intercultural collaborative learning courses and virtual exchanges. These endeavors foster JLF communication between local students (first language speakers; L1 speakers) and Japanese language learners (non-L1 speakers) from overseas partner universities to enrich their communication skills and intercultural competence, thereby bridging the linguistic divide through a common medium of choice. However, research on L1 speakers in the LF paradigm is limited. This study examined the dynamics experienced by Japanese L1 speakers as they adapt, communicate, and perceive their roles and behaviors in a JLF context. Drawing upon online JLF interactions and subsequent interviews, empirical data are presented to highlight the distinctive behaviors and perceptions of Japanese L1 speakers in these situations compared with other L1-speaker contexts. These findings provide valuable insights into their attitudes and strategies for effective communication. Furthermore, this study explores the pedagogical implications of these findings, providing educators with practical insights into preparing L1 students for meaningful engagement in JLF scenarios, thereby promoting intercultural understanding and effective communication.

Keywords: Japanese as a Lingua Franca, First Language Speakers, Intercultural Competence

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Introduction

In an era characterized by globalization and linguistic diversity, it is imperative to understand lingua franca (LF) communication that serves as a bridge allowing people who speak different first languages to communicate effectively. English as a lingua franca (ELF) has been studied extensively in linguistics and language-education fields (Konakahara & Tsuchiya, 2020). This study addresses a unique aspect of this field by examining Japanese as a lingua franca (JLF) (Akiyama, Akashi, & Li, 2020). In contrast to the ubiquitous role of English as a global lingua franca, Japanese has carved out a niche role by becoming prevalent in specific communities and contexts such as academic, business, and community settings. For example, internationalization efforts in the Japanese higher education sector have led to the emergence of intercultural collaborative learning courses (Suematsu, Akiba & Yonezawa, 2019) and virtual exchanges (O'Dowd, 2021). These educational initiatives create a dynamic environment for JLF communication, connecting domestic students (first language speakers; L1 speakers) with Japanese language learners (non-L1 speakers) from international partner universities.

The primary focus of this research is on the underexplored perspective of L1 speakers within the LF paradigm, specifically Japanese L1 speakers. LF communication typically involves both L1 and non-L1 speakers, serving as a bridge across linguistic divisions. However, the roles and experiences of L1 speakers in such settings have not been studied extensively, especially in the JLF context. Mori, Hasegawa, & Mori (2021) provide a comprehensive review of a variety of empirical research interests in the 2010s in Japanese language and the pedagogical challenges and experiences of non-L1 (or as it is referred to, L2) speakers of Japanese. In contrast, research focusing on L1 interlocutors is limited (e.g., Yamada, 2021). This study aims to fill this gap by examining how L1 speakers of Japanese adapt their communication strategies and perceive their roles and behaviors in the LF context.

This study analyzed online JLF interactions and follow-up interviews to provide empirical evidence of the distinctive behaviors and perceptions of Japanese L1 speakers. By comparing these findings with typical L1-speaker scenarios, this research sheds light on the unique strategies and attitudes that L1 speakers employ to communicate effectively in JLF settings. Furthermore, this study extends beyond the theoretical insights into practical applications. It explores the pedagogical implications of these findings and offers educators valuable guidance for preparing L1 students to meaningfully participate in JLF scenarios. This approach enhances intercultural understanding and equips students with the skills necessary for effective meaning negotiations in a linguistically diverse world. This study contributes to the broader discourse on LF communication by providing a nuanced understanding of the role of L1 speakers, specifically in the JLF context.

Study Context

As defined by Knight (2004, 2008), Internationalization of Higher Education (IoHE) is the incorporation of an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the nature and delivery of post-secondary education. It rests on two main pillars: internationalization abroad, commonly known as studying abroad, and internationalization at home (IaH). The concept of the IaH is broad. Beelen and Jones (2015) defined it as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments (p. 69).” The push for IaH has become prominent in Japanese universities. A key aspect of this movement is the integration of

International Collaborative Learning (ICL) courses into academic curricula, which has received considerable attention. In addition, the adoption of virtual exchange (VE) activities has increased rapidly, especially owing to the global pandemic. Within the ICL and VE, communication facilitated by ELF and JLF can occur in the context of Japanese higher education. Our study examines the latter, focusing on the JLF as a medium for ICL courses and VE initiatives within an educational and intercultural framework.

For clarity, this study uses the term “L1 speakers” to refer to what is referred to elsewhere as native speakers, who are typically domestic Japanese students enrolled in Japanese universities. Conversely, “non-L1 speakers” refers to learners of Japanese at various levels of proficiency, be they second, third, or even fourth language learners, who generally come to Japan on a temporary basis, whether physically or virtually, either admitted as regular international students or as international students from our partner institutions around the world. Both L1 and non-L1 speakers are potential participants in JLF-mediated ICL courses and VE activities. ICL includes an educational environment in which domestic and international students benefit by taking advantage of learning opportunities to complete assigned tasks and overcoming potential linguistic and cultural barriers during authentic communication and meaningful interactions (Sakamoto, Horie, & Yonezawa, 2017). A VE is often designed with a similar objective.

Drawing on Seidlhofer’s (2011) and Jenkins’ (2009) definitions of ELF, we adopt the viewpoint that LF refers to the use of a common language for communication between individuals who do not share the same first language. In this light, L1 speakers are part of the dialogue in LF communication. It is important to emphasize that JLF communication is not limited to non-L1 Japanese speakers as it actively includes L1 speakers. In the domain of JLF, we encounter two different scenarios: those involving only non-L1 speakers, which we refer to as “non-L1 situations,” and those involving both L1 and non-L1 speakers, which we refer to as “L1/non-L1 mixed situations.” These are contrasted with “L1 situations,” in which communication occurs exclusively between L1 speakers. By recognizing, analyzing, and comparing these different scenarios, we can better understand the dynamics and nuances of the JLF.

Research Objectives and Setting

As the importance of LF communication continues to grow, it has become apparent that there is a significant research gap, particularly regarding L1 speakers’ experiences and roles in these settings. Predominant research has focused on how non-L1 speakers adapt to LF use. However, L1 speakers’ narratives and experiences in this context have not been thoroughly investigated. Our research aims to fill this gap by investigating how Japanese L1 speakers maneuver through interactions using their L1 in an LF context. We are particularly interested in understanding how L1 speakers modify their language use to accommodate interlocutors from different linguistic backgrounds and how they perceive their own roles during LF exchanges.

The setting for our research was the Japan-US Online Conversation Project, an initiative that spanned two years between 2020 and 2021, a global transitional period that necessitated new approaches to intercultural communication and education. Participants were recruited voluntarily from one Japanese university and two US universities. This study adhered to the ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Consent

was obtained to record and transcribe the interactions and interviews. The rationale and design of this project are described in detail in Takei, Fujiwara, & Shimojo (2021).

As part of this project, we implemented a virtual version of the JLF-mediated ICL courses and a pseudo-ICL experimental venue to collect data on intercultural interactions. Tables 1 and 2 below show the number of participating students(39) and groups (25) organized into three types of interactional situations for comparison during the two-year project. The groups were structured as follows: an L1-only group consisting solely of L1 Japanese speakers at a Japanese university, a non-L1-only group consisting entirely of non-L1 speakers from two US universities, and an L1/non-L1 mixed group including both L1 and non-L1 speakers. These configurations allowed a rich analysis of the communication dynamics in different LF scenarios.

	2020	2021	Total
JP (L1)	10	6	16
US (non-L1)	15	8	23
Total	25	14	39

Table 1: Number of project participants

	2020	2021	Total
L1 situation	2	2	4
Non-L1 situation	5	3	8
L1/non-L1 mixed situation	8	5	13
Total	15	10	25

Table 2: Number of groups organized in the project

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the dynamics of JLF, focusing on the behavior and perceptions of Japanese L1 speakers in LF contexts. First, we analyzed real-time online interactions in a JLF setting, and then conducted follow-up interviews with Japanese L1 speakers as well as non-L1 speakers to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data, respectively. Using discourse analysis, we examined online interactions to understand the communicative flow and nuances of the JLF. We then analyzed the interviews, which provided insights into the participants' personal experiences and strategies used during the interactions. This mixed-methods approach was instrumental in capturing a multifaceted view of experiences and communicative tactics within the JLF context, providing a deep understanding of the intricacies involved in such interactions.

1. Discourse Analysis of Interactions

The primary data source is the recorded online interactions with Japanese L1 speakers and non-L1 Japanese language learners in a pseudo-ICL setting. The task given to a group of three participants was to generate three ideas for possible online intercultural exchange activities during the pandemic-induced period of immobility. Each session began with a brief introduction by a practitioner researcher, followed by a 10-minute discussion and brief presentation. The session concluded with a brief wrap-up and questions and comments from the practitioner researcher to create a quasi-project-based learning setting. The use of Japanese as the contact language was encouraged, but the use of other languages (i.e., English) was not explicitly prohibited and was left to participants' choice. The session was

audiovisually recorded using Zoom. The interactions were transcribed verbatim for subsequent discourse analysis.

There are many facets of the spoken discourse study, as it consists of a sequence of utterances of different types and is characterized by turn-taking between speakers. This study focuses on the syntactic types of utterances interwoven throughout discourse. By examining how different syntactic structures are used and distributed across speakers' turns, we gain insights into the mechanics of communication in the JLF context. This analysis of utterance types can reveal the patterns, preferences, and adjustments made by speakers during LF interactions.

Following Usami (2019), our analysis defined an utterance as roughly equivalent to a sentence. This delineation allows us to systematically categorize and analyze the structure of spoken language as it naturally occurs in conversation, providing a clear framework for analyzing and understanding the components of discourse in a JLF setting.

According to Usami's (2019) Basic Transcription System for Japanese (BTSJ) guidelines, five main utterance types with syntactic categories were found in discourse analysis.

- I. *Complete sentence utterance*: This type has the traditional structure of subject, object, and predicate with the occasional omission of an element that can be inferred from the context.
- II. *Inverted sentence utterance*: In this type of utterance, the elements of the sentence are arranged in a nonstandard order, triggered by emphasis or addition.
- III. *Incomplete sentence utterance*: The sentence is left incomplete. In Japanese, it is common for the speaker to skip the implied main clause, especially after a subordinate clause, leaving the listener to infer the conclusion.
- IV. *Reactive response utterance*: A brief and immediate response that may indicate agreement, convey emotional reactions, or signal active listening and encouragement to the speaker to continue.
- V. *One-word utterance*: As the name suggests, this type consists of a single word, often reflecting the repetition or mirroring of a word or phrase from the speaker's previous utterance.

These categorizations of utterances may help researchers analyze and understand the finer details of how speakers interact, construct their thoughts, and respond to each other within a conversation.

2. Content Analysis of Interviews

Following these interactions, post-interaction interviews were conducted using Zoom with both the L1 and non-L1 participants. These semi-structured interviews aimed to gain insight into their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences while communicating in the JLF context. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated, where necessary, to ensure the accuracy of the participants' perspectives.

Analysis Results

We descriptively analyzed our data and compiled the frequencies of the different types of utterances observed in our discourse. The results show that “reactive response” utterances is the most frequently used syntactic utterance type, followed by “complete sentence,” “incomplete sentence,” and “one-word” utterances. The utterance, “inverted sentence,” is the least used by participants. It is particularly noteworthy that this frequency pattern holds true for all three groups that we studied: the L1, non-L1, and L1/non-L1 mixed groups.

We observed some clear differences when we examined the specific proportions of utterance types within each group, as shown in Figure 1. The pie chart for the L1-only group shows a higher proportion of the non-standard types of “incomplete sentences,” “one-word,” and “inverted sentences” compared to the other groups. This striking pattern requires further investigation.

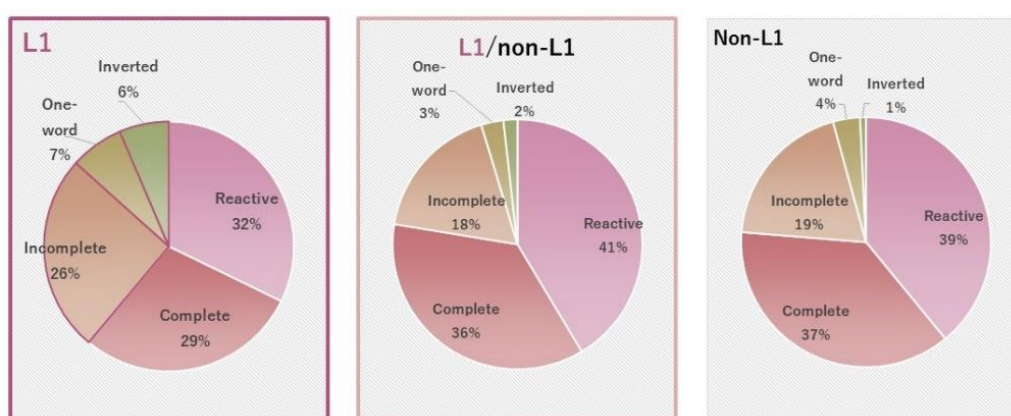


Figure 1: Utterance type proportion in three situations

As our research focused on the behavior and perspectives of L1 speakers, it was essential to examine their behavior in different settings. We chose to compare the frequency of “complete sentences” used by L1 speakers when they are among their L1 peers with its frequency when they are in a mixed group with non-L1 speakers. This provides valuable insights into how L1 speakers adjust their speech in the presence of non-L1 speakers in an LF context.

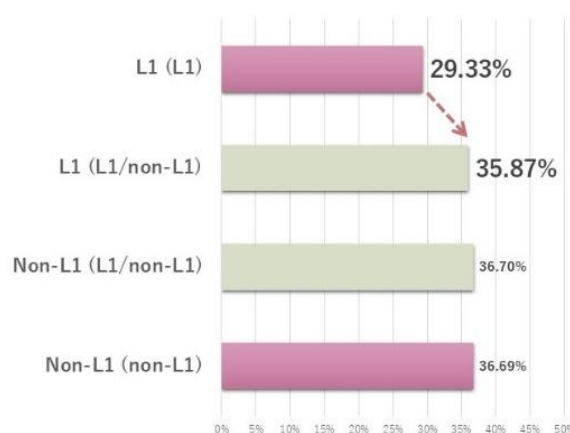


Figure 2: Comparative proportion of complete sentence utterances by L1 and non-L1

The bar chart in Figure 2 shows the comparative proportions of “complete sentence” utterances produced by 11 L1 speakers versus 21 non-L1 speakers who participated in the

two group settings. It is clear from the visual data that the 11 L1 speakers used “complete sentence” utterances more frequently when they are in a mixed group with non-L1 speakers. This suggests that L1 speakers consciously or unconsciously modify their speech in linguistically diverse environments to facilitate clearer communication. However, the proportion of “complete sentence” utterances by non-L1 speakers remained relatively stable, regardless of group composition. The bar chart represents group averages and provides a broad overview. Table 3 allows a granular analysis by indicating the individual data for each of the 11 L1 speakers and highlights the variability and personal strategies within the L1 speaker group.

Participant ID	L1		L1/non-L1 mixed		difference
	ratio	frequency	ratio	frequency	
JP12	25.00%	7/28	59.26%	16/27	34.26%
JP11	9.52%	4/42	36.36%	24/66	26.84%
JP02	22.95%	14/61	39.22%	20/51	16.27%
JP01	39.08%	34/87	52.70%	39/74	13.62%
JP05	21.92%	16/73	29.09%	16/55	7.17%
JP04	28.36%	19/67	34.78%	40/115	6.42%
JP03a	33.33%	5/15	33.33%	16/48	0.00%
JP03b	27.50%	11/40	24.59%	15/61	-2.91%
JP15	25.00%	4/16	18.52%	5/27	-6.48%
JP14	40.00%	22/55	29.58%	21/71	-10.42%
JP13	50.00%	9/18	37.18%	29/78	-12.82%
Average	29.33%		35.87%		6.54%

Table 3: Changes of “complete sentence” utterance proportion by 11 L1 participants

This chart provides a detailed look at the behavior of 11 Japanese L1 speakers and how they adapt their use of “complete sentence” utterances in different group settings: with L1-only speakers and with a mix of L1 and non-L1 speakers. The data indicate that “complete sentence” utterances, which are syntactically the most standard and complete form of the five utterance types, are used differently by L1 participants in mixed-group situations compared to L1-only situations. This variability is illustrated by the participants’ unique IDs, with the order reflecting an increase or decrease in the use of “complete sentences” in mixed-group situations, ranging from 34.26% to -12.82%. With an average increase of 6.54% in the use of “complete sentences,” considerable variation was observed among L1 speakers. The top four participants (pink) showed an increase of more than 13% in their use of “complete sentences.” They were characterized by their previous experiences with intercultural exchange. By contrast, the bottom three participants (indicated in green) showed a decrease and were inexperienced in such exchanges.

This distinction between experienced and inexperienced participants demonstrates how intercultural experiences influence language adaptation in LF settings. A further analysis of utterance type distribution between the two situations, focused on the four experienced students, provides more nuanced insights into the adaptive strategies of L1 speakers.

The four bar graphs in Figure 3 illustrate the changes in the distribution of utterance types of the four experienced participants (JP12, JP11, JP02, and JP01) as they moved from the L1-only to the L1/non-L1 mixed situations. For JP12 and JP11, the proportion of complete sentences increased dramatically, indicating a clear shift in their communication style when non-L1 speakers were part of the conversation. This shift also resulted in a corresponding decrease in the frequency of other utterance types, suggesting that a more elaborate or formal mode of communication may be used in a mixed setting. Conversely, JP02 and JP01 demonstrate a more balanced approach. While there was an increase in the frequency of “complete sentences,” they maintained or even increased their use of “reactive response” utterances. This may indicate a strategy for maintaining engagement, providing support to non-L1 speakers, ensuring comprehension, and encouraging continued dialogue. These variations in linguistic adjustment among experienced L1 speakers underscore their adaptability and responsiveness to the communicative needs of their interlocutors in LF environments. These findings contribute to our understanding of the complexities and dynamics of intercultural communication.

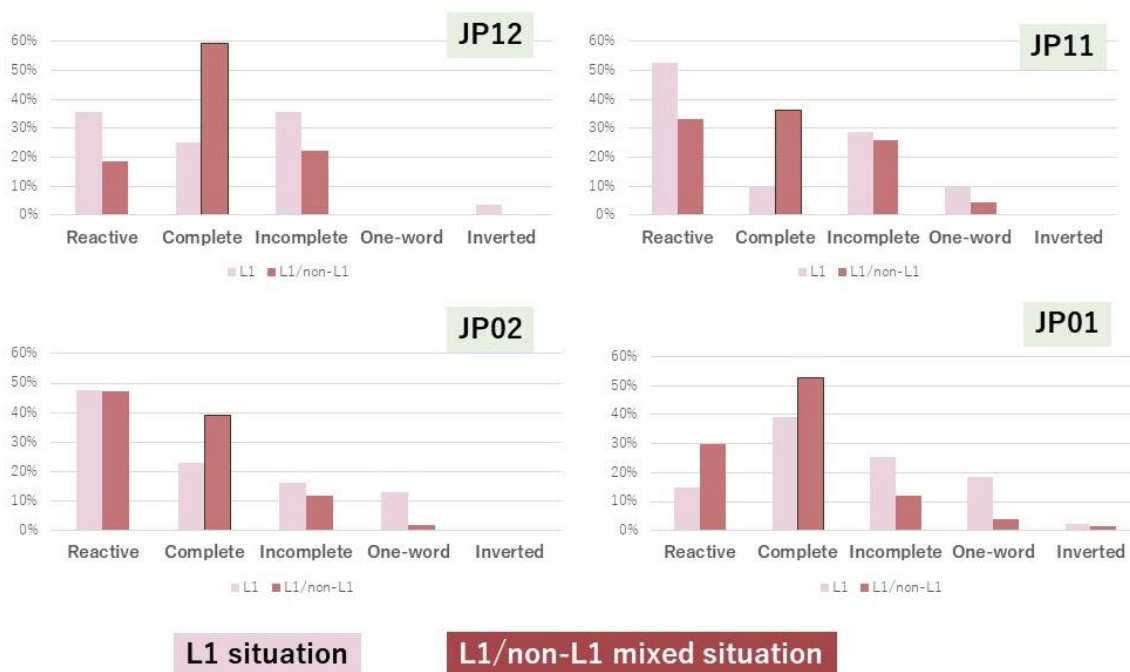


Figure 3: Changes in utterance type distribution of 4 participants

A mixed-methods approach was used to enrich the research by bridging quantitative data from discourse analysis with qualitative insights from interviews. They help uncover participants’ attitudes, level of awareness or lack thereof, and self-perceived behaviors in the context of JLF interactions. This combination allowed for a more comprehensive examination of the relationship between the observed linguistic behaviors and participants’ internal cognitive and affective processes.

Both JP12 and JP11 noticeably increased their use of “complete sentence” utterances when interacting with non-L1 speakers. This behavior is consistent with the conscious efforts described in the interviews to increase clarity and comprehensibility in communication. JP12 referred to her adherence to the principles of “Plain Japanese,” a set of guidelines she was introduced to in her Japanese as a Foreign Language class that aims to make language clearer and more straightforward for non-L1 speakers living in Japan (Iori, 2016). This method

involves expressing oneself in a “clear, concise, and complete” manner (Yoshikai, 2020), which influenced her communication style. On the contrary, JP11 showed a heightened awareness of her role in conversations. She made conscious efforts to lead and contribute to the dialogue while simultaneously monitoring comprehension, particularly with her non-L1 partners. This suggests a level of metacommunication in which JP11 was engaged in conversation and thought about how her speech was being received and understood. The self-awareness and strategies reported by JP12 and JP11 during the interviews were reflected in the linguistic patterns observed in discourse analysis. Their efforts to adapt their language use to facilitate effective communication with non-L1 speakers reflect the skills and awareness that can be fostered through intercultural experience and language education.

JP02’s approach during the interaction reflects a conscious effort to maintain a standard form of Japanese, which she refers to as “avoiding broken Japanese.” This indicates the desire to use a more formally structured language, possibly to ensure clarity and ease of understanding for non-L1 speakers. Her strategy also includes actively engaging her non-L1 partner by asking questions, thereby assuming the role of a listener and speaker. This reflects a dynamic and interactive communication style that encourages participation by all parties. JP01’s strategy during the interaction was to use polite Japanese forms, which inherently resulted in complete sentences. Her awareness of her speech style is interesting because it suggests a conscious decision to communicate in a way that may be more accessible to non-L1 speakers. In addition, she demonstrated patience by allowing her partners to complete their utterances without interruption and then providing reactive responses. This is particularly revealing, as it may differ from the norm in L1 Japanese interactions, where inter-utterance reactive responses are common. As revealed in the interviews, the perceived behaviors of JP02 and JP01 were consistent with the linguistic patterns observed in the discourse analysis. Their frequent use of complete sentences and reactive responses suggests conscious adaptation of their communicative styles to facilitate more effective LF interactions.

Findings and Pedagogical Implications

This study sheds light on the intricate dynamics of communication that occur when L1 Japanese speakers engage in dialogue in a JLF environment, highlighting how the types of utterances change depending on the context of their interaction. The study of four students with backgrounds in intercultural exchanges was particularly interesting. These students made deliberate adjustments to their language, as evidenced by their increased use of “complete sentence” utterances. This linguistic strategy aims to facilitate better understanding among non-L1 speakers, thereby improving the clarity of communication. Semi-structured follow-up interviews provided further evidence of these deliberate adaptations in language use and shed light on the strategic approaches these L1 speakers used to fulfill their perceived responsibilities in the conversation. These responsibilities included moving the interaction forward and ensuring that it was accessible to their non-L1 partners, and that their comprehension was constantly assessed and accommodated. Such findings underscore the role of L1 speakers in JLF contexts, not only as participants but also as active facilitators of communication, attuned to the needs of their interlocutors and the demands of a smooth and intelligible exchange.

The results of this study provide valuable insights into educational practices, particularly intercultural education. This evidence suggests a significant role for L1 speakers in successful JLF interactions. Recognizing this, there is a clear opportunity to develop new pedagogical strategies that prepare L1 speakers for their unique roles in JLF scenarios. The goal is to

equip L1 speakers with the linguistic skills, cultural sensitivity, and awareness required to participate effectively and empathetically in conversations with non-L1 speakers. This approach advocates a more proactive role for L1 speakers in intercultural settings, encouraging them to adopt behaviors and strategies that promote mutual understanding and engagement.

The practical application of the study's findings to classroom activities aimed to improve students' readiness for LF interactions. Understanding the natural flow of L1 speakers' language interactions is critical for effective linguistic adjustment. L1 communication often occurs unconsciously, without active thoughts about the structure or completeness of utterances. The pie chart below, reflecting L1 interactions from conversations collected in a 2023 course at the author's university, shows that complete sentence utterances comprise only one-third (34%) of utterances, which is consistent with the L1 data in this study. Other types of utterances, whether fragmented or non-standard, also play a significant role in the fluid negotiation of meaning in Japanese, and they do so without causing serious communication problems. These data points, collected from L1 speakers in class and objectively analyzed, indicated increased awareness of students' own language and cultural norms. Such awareness is crucial not only for understanding one's own linguistic behavior, but also for appreciating and adapting to the communication styles of speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

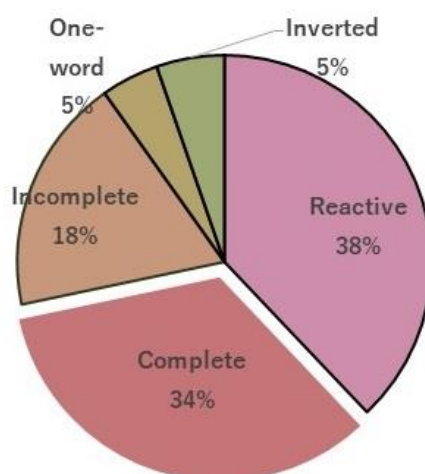


Figure 4: L1 utterance type distribution from a 2023 class

Knowledge of the intrinsic patterns of Japanese L1 communication enables students to interpret the behaviors they encounter more accurately and refine their attitudes toward linguistic and cultural differences. It also equips them with the skills to sensitively decide when to make linguistic modifications or maintain their natural communication style, ultimately leading to more effective and adaptive intercultural interactions, as pointed out by Byram (1997). For L1 speakers, JLF interactions typically involve minimal exposure to the target language, often English. However, as Takei (2023) notes, JLF-mediated exchange is inherently reciprocal. They offer non-L1 speakers the opportunity to engage with L1 Japanese, while L1 speakers gain the opportunity to increase their language awareness and experience the dynamic cycle of “knowledge-attitude-skill.”

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study highlights the significant, yet often underestimated role of L1 speakers in LF settings. By examining the distribution of utterance types in Japanese L1 communication, this study elucidates the intricate dynamics that L1 speakers navigate during such interactions. Understanding these dynamics is critical for fostering effective intercultural communication and collaboration in our globalized world, where LF interactions are becoming the norm. To improve the effectiveness of these communications, this study suggests that an L1 interaction analysis be incorporated into intercultural education programs. This inclusion aims to raise L1 speakers' awareness of their communication styles and how non-L1 speakers perceive and understand them.

While this study provides valuable insights, it also acknowledges the limitations of its scope, which focused solely on the distribution of utterance types. Future research could extend these findings by exploring other aspects of linguistic phenomena in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Indeed, there are several intriguing directions for future research informed by insights gained from L1 speakers' experiences during interviews. One promising area of study is the broader application of discourse analysis, particularly the study of phenomena such as "aizuchi." These short reactive utterances, which are a staple of Japanese L1 communication, seem to pose a challenge in LF interactions, where non-L1 speakers may not use them often, causing discomfort or anxiety for L1 speakers. Some L1 speakers adapt by adjusting their use of aizuchi to better match the communicative styles of non-L1 speakers. The challenges L1 speakers face in adapting their language, such as simplifying or rephrasing to a more accessible vocabulary and determining the appropriate timing and audience for such adaptations, are also crucial areas for further research. These accommodations require a delicate balance between linguistic skills and cultural sensitivity, and understanding the decision-making process behind them can inform language teaching practices.

Finally, maintaining the authenticity and fluidity of L1 communication, while facilitating smooth and effective LF interactions, is crucial. This balance is essential for authentic and effective intercultural dialogue, and embodies a sophisticated blend of linguistic proficiency, cultural insight, and flexibility. Several L1 participants expressed pressure and discomfort when adapting to non-L1 norms. In relation to this issue of balance, investigating how non-L1 speakers of various proficiency levels perceive adapted LF norms deliberately employed by L1 speakers represents a challenging but fascinating area for future research.

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