Learning Japanese and "Japanese Way" of Relating: Perceptions Revealed in Interviews with International Students Studying at Seinan

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1. Introduction

1.1 The increasing number of Japanese language learners

The pace of globalization continues to accelerate these days. Japan, like many other countries, has witnessed many influences of globalization. For one thing, Japan has been accepting more international students in recent years (MEXT, 2017) since the Japanese government established the "100,000 International Students Project" in 1983 when only 10,428 international students were studying in Japan (Ministry of Education, 1986). According to a 2017 survey by the Japan Student Services Organization, an independent administrative agency established under the MEXT, 239,287 international students were enrolled in educational institutions in Japan as of May 2016, and the number of international students increased by 14.8 percent (30,908 more students) compared to the previous year.

Also the Japanese language has been becoming more and more popular for foreigners to learn these days, and 3,655,024 foreigners are studying it outside Japan (The Japan Foundation, 2017). This number is over 28 times higher than the number of foreigners (127,167) who reported to be studying Japanese in the 1979 survey (The Japan Foundation, 2017).

1.2 Building competent interpersonal relationships in Japan

It is crucial for this growing number of international students to communicate competently in Japan in order to achieve their academic goals. However, international students studying in Japan have been facing various problems in communicating with Japanese. The increasing number of international students has heightened the need for investigating how they could build competent interpersonal relationships in Japanese society.

2. Literature Survey

2.1 Relationship between language ability and cultural adaptation

Language is an indispensable element in communicating competently across cultures. Many recent studies have investigated the relationship between language ability and cultural adaptation (e.g., Brown, 2008; Harada, 2013; Jiang, Green, Henley, & Masten, 2009; Ryan, 2005; Schumann, 1986; Young & Faux, 2012). Lacking language facility can cause a decline in confidence and self-esteem in international students (Ryan, 2005). However, as linguistic competence develops, improved language skills facilitate communication (Brown, 2008; Harada,

2013). International students perceive that high language proficiency is essential and advantageous to make a stable sojourn in different cultures (Harada, 2013). Studies have revealed that language ability positively affects the ways of communication in the new environment.

Conversely, cultural adaptation facilitates language acquisition (Jiang, Green, Henley, & Masten, 2009). Schumann (1986) explains that the learner will acquire the second language only to the degree that the learner adapts to the society.

For example, in the researcher's observation of a Euro Class at a public junior high school in Paris, France (2013), students were willingly participating in English learning and the atmosphere was very active. The Euro Class is an additional foreign language class which was introduced in 1992 in France. The teachers of the school explained that they select eligible students not by their achievements of English at that moment but by their motivation through one-on-one interviews. The teachers also said that the class was very successful with students' making significant progress. The following is part of a response of a student who was enrolled in the Euro Class:

> *"J'adore la culture anglaise/americaine. Je voudrais etudier la culture anglo-saxonne"* ("I like the culture of UK and USA very much. I would like to learn English culture.")

The teachers described how important students' motivations are in language learning including their interest in the culture. This example illustrates the positive relationship between a learner's interest in culture and motivation to learn the language.

2.2 International students' communication problems in Japanese society

However, literature has shown that even after having acquired language ability to some extent, international students face difficulties in communicating in the new environment (Martin & Nakayama, 2014). This appears to be especially true to the Japanese context, which is regarded as, to say the least, peculiar by a number of scholars (e.g., Kim, 2002; Ting-Toomey, 2005; Ohashi, Kondo, Hata, Horie, & Yokota, 1992; Sasagawa, 1996) inside and outside Japan.

One of the main difficulties international students face is the interpretation of ambiguous expressions in the Japanese language (Kanokkuwan, 2012; Sasagawa, 1996).

International students are further confused by the complexity of interpersonal relationships in Japanese society. Students feel it difficult to build harmonious relationships with Japanese, so they carefully choose appropriate words and expressions (Kashiwazaki, 1992; Ohashi, Kondo, Hata, Horie, & Yokota, 1992). Indirectness in personal relationships in Japanese society is also the source of distress for international students (Ohashi, Kondo, Hata, Horie, & Yokota, 1992).

International students studying in Japan face such harsh realities. What is needed to communicate effectively and appropriately in interacting across cultures besides language ability, particularly Japanese?

2.3 Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence can be classified into motivation, knowledge, and attitudes (Martin & Nakayama, 2013). Motivation is the desire to make a commitment in relationships, to learn about the self and others, and to remain flexible, which is the most important dimension of communication competence. The knowledge component is comprised of self-knowledge (the way in which one is perceived as a communicator), other-knowledge (knowledge of how people from other cultures think and behave), and linguistic knowledge (knowledge of other

languages besides one's native language or of the difficulty of learning a second or third language). Attitudes mean a person's disposition, including tolerance for ambiguity, empathy, and nonjudgmentalism as a component of intercultural communication competence. Tolerance for ambiguity is the ease in which an individual deals with situations where a great deal is unknown. Empathy is the capacity to identify with another person and nonjudgmentalism is to avoid evaluating according to one's own cultural frame of reference (Martin & Nakayama, 2013).

However, can such theories of intercultural competence advocated by Western scholars be completely applied to the Japanese context, where communication style differs greatly from that in the Western context? To investigate this question, the features of Japanese culture, the Japanese language in personal relationships, and Japanese social interactions will be explored.

2.4 The characteristics of Japanese culture, the Japanese language in personal relationships, and Japanese social interactions

Since language and cultural values are inextricably linked and language influences culture and vice versa (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Na & Choi, 2009), I will first investigate the tendency of Japanese culture which affects its language and the way of communication, and then the characteristics of the Japanese language in personal relationships and Japanese social interactions.

2.4.1 Japanese culture

What tendencies does Japanese culture have with regard to interpersonal relationships and social practices? Although there are many cultural pattern taxonomies, one of the most heavily studied is collectivist and individualist cultures. Both patterns exist in all cultures, although one pattern usually dominates (Lane, 2010). Japan tends more towards a collectivist culture than an individualist (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Kim, 2002; Ting-Toomey, 2005). Features of collectivism include an emphasis on the views, needs, and goals of the ingroup rather than on the self and an emphasis on behavior determined by social norms and duties rather than by pleasure or personal advantage. Common beliefs are shared with the ingroup and people willingly cooperate with ingroup members (Triandas, 1990).

Another feature of Japanese culture would be described as people having interdependent self-construal. Self-construal is a concept that explains how the individual perceives the self in relation to others. Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that people in different cultures have different construals of the self, of others, and of the interdependence of the two. These construals are said to influence, and often determine, the very nature of individual experience including cognition, emotion, and motivation. In independent self-construal behavior is organized and made meaningful mainly by reference to one's own internal thoughts, feelings, and actions, rather than by reference to those of others. On the contrary interdependent construal of the self becomes most meaningful and complete when it is cast in the appropriate social relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Although recent literature has shown that Japanese have been becoming less interdependent and collectivistic than they had been (Miyanaga, 1991), it appears to be still true that Japanese have these tendencies in particular when it comes to face management and conflict management, for example (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Ting-Tommey & Kurogi, 1998). In Japanese culture whose social interactions are influenced by its collectivistic culture and where people are inclined to have interdependent self-construal, it is understandable that international students from different cultures encounter difficulties in communication.

2.4.2 The Japanese language in personal relationships

Literature shows some peculiarities in the Japanese language with regard to personal relationships.

Japanese seem to prefer leaving the subject vague or sometimes omitting it altogether, either consciously or subconsciously (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This, of course, includes the first person pronoun. Oe, Kawai, and Tanigawa (1998) explain that Japanese often omit the first person pronoun, while the first person pronoun resides in the speaker's mind and the hearer's mind as well. In contrast, however, in individualistic cultures the use of the first person pronoun as subject is common or sometimes necessary (Kashimas, 1998). Uz (2014) found that the greater relative use of first person pronouns is related to higher levels of individualism.

Japanese tend to identify themselves in relation to others (Tatara, 1990), which also affects the Japanese language. Lane (2010) states that English is the only language in which the *I* is capitalized in writing and the English language has one word for the first-person singular as it relates to others. This may influence the way the language users think of themselves as entities that exist apart from others (Lane, 2010). In contrast, in terms of how the first-person singular relates to others, there are many words for *I* in the Japanese language. Moreover the Japanese language has many forms of the pronoun *you*, which is also considered to affect formality of Japanese culture. According to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis developed by linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, in terms of relation to others language distinctions such as formal and informal pronouns affect our culture's notion of formality (Martin & Nakayama, 2013).

2.4.3 Japanese social interactions

Research has shown that Japanese try to avoid making uncomfortable situations in interpersonal communication, which leads to various characteristics in the use of the Japanese language (Kindaichi, 1975).

Japanese also tend to regard it a virtue to speak less and indirectly (Kindaichi, 2002). Kindaichi (2002) explains that Japanese get used to and are good at inferring others' feelings, so simple and shorter sentences are preferred in usual conversations. Miyahara (1992) states that a vast reservoir of vocabulary, proverbs, and maxims illustrates the Japanese distrust of detailed and explicit styles of communication and their preferences for implicit, intuitive and evasive communication.

As such, literature has revealed that there are some peculiar features in Japanese culture, the Japanese language in personal relationships, and Japanese social interactions. Could these peculiar features impede international students' Japanese language learning due to cultural dissimilarity as Schumann (1986) posits? Furthermore, how could these factors affect international students' competent communication with Japanese?

2.5 Building personal relationships in Japanese society

Language ability alone is insufficient to build satisfactory personal relationships in different cultures (Martin & Nakayama, 2014). If, as researchers say, Japanese is in fact, peculiar, international students will be expected to face a lot of difficulties in learning the Japanese language which is greatly influenced by Japanese culture and personal relationships.

Although considerable research has been devoted to elucidate international students' communication problems and intercultural competence, most of it has been done in Euro-American contexts. Even though past studies conducted in Japan provide some information on international students' communication problems in Japanese society, many of the studies were done 20 to 40 years ago when there were far fewer international students in Japan. Accordingly, the situations surrounding international students appear to be very different from

those of the present. Moreover, recent studies conducted in Japan have tended to focus on Japanese language teachers' perspectives, rather than on international students' perspectives. It remains unclear how international students perceive the relationship between Japanese language acquisition and competent interpersonal relationships in Japan.

This study will explore what difficulties international students have perceived in learning the Japanese language, especially in relation to personal relationships. It is expected that their perceptions toward personal relationships change as their Japanese language ability becomes higher. Do their perceptions toward personal relationships with Japanese change in their Japanese language learning process? If so, how do their perceptions change and how do the changes affect their Japanese language learning? This study will try to find answers to these questions. If an interrelationship between language ability and perceptions toward personal relationships is found, this study may contribute to Japanese language education and language education in general, making it a step forward in the understanding of how international students can build competent personal relationships in Japan.

Research Questions

R.Q. 1: What difficulties have international students perceived in learning the Japanese language, especially in relation to personal relationships?

R.Q. 2: How, if at all, have their perceptions toward personal relationships with Japanese changed as their Japanese language ability has become higher?

R.Q. 3: How, if at all, have these changes in perception affected their Japanese language learning?

3. Method

3.1 Data collection and analysis

Data for this study were collected through interviews with 20 international students. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, excluding the portions that obviously had nothing to do with the purpose of this study such as "small talk." Using the inductive framework of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and qualitative analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), the interview recordings, transcripts, and notes were analyzed and coded. The data were then refined and categorized. More specifically, firstly transcripts were scrutinized to understand what interviewees meant or alluded to in their answers to the questions. Then each student's remarks which had similar codes were categorized. The details are discussed in the Results section. Through these procedures salient findings are elaborated in this study.

3.2 Participants and recruitment

Participants in this study were recruited at a private university and a private language institute in a provincial city with a population of over 1,500,000 in Japan. At the time of this study the university's student population was approximately 8,000 and it had 62 international students in its Study Abroad Program. The language institute had around 450 Japanese language learners. Two qualifications applied for acceptance in the study. Students needed to be currently enrolled in the university or the institute and be from Europe or the U.S. The reason for concentrating on students currently enrolled in educational programs was to collect live information, and not retrospective. Also it is expected that students might not remember their experiences accurately in hindsight.

Additionally, for the purpose of this study both language and personal relationships should be very different from those of Japanese, thus students from Western cultures were solicited.

A total of 20 students (6 females, 14 males) took part in the survey. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 28, with the majority being between 20 and 22. Their mother tongues were English (n=5), Italian (n=5), French (n=3), Danish (n=2), Swedish (n=2), Finnish (n=1), Spanish (n=1), and German (n=1). Of the 20 students, 11 had just arrived in Japan and 9 students had stayed in Japan and learned the Japanese language between 5 months to 1 year. All students satisfied the two requirements of this study.

3.3 Research design

This study used an in-depth semi-structured interview to examine the relationship between international students' Japanese language proficiency and their perceptions toward personal relationships with Japanese. Two groups of interviewees (Groups I and II) were asked several interview questions; Group I included the students who had just arrived in Japan (n=11) and Group II the students who had stayed in Japan for a period of time (n=9). The questions were classified into several categories so that interviews of these two groups would cohere with each other. Interview questions for the two groups are as follows:

<1> Interview questions for Group I

I. The Japanese language

- What kind of impressions do you have of the Japanese language?
- To what extent do you expect your Japanese will improve here?

II. Difficulties in communicating in the Japanese language

- What difficulties did you find in communicating in the Japanese language?
- Do you foresee any difficulties in communicating in the Japanese language?

III. Personal relationships

- What do you think are the characteristics of personal relationships in your home country?
- What impressions do you have of personal relationships in Japanese society?

<2> Interview questions for Group II

I. Improvement of the Japanese language

- To what extent has your Japanese improved since you came to Japan?

II. Difficulties in learning the Japanese language

- What difficulties did you find in learning the Japanese language, especially in relation to personal relationships?

III. Personal relationships

- What do you think are the characteristics of personal relationships in Japanese society?

A total of 16 interviews were conducted in May, July, and September in 2015. Each interview took approximately 30 to 40 minutes and was done in English. A combination of one-on-one and group interviews was done; one-on-one interviews because it encourages interviewees to reveal deep feelings and real problems and group interviews because they are useful in eliciting information by aiding participants' recall and stimulating their thinking through group discussion (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Also as preliminary research, language learning class was observed at a public junior high school in Paris,

France in September, 2013. Fifteen out of 20 interviewees in this study are from Europe, so this preliminary study helped in understanding and realizing attitudes toward language learning in Europe where the Euro has put emphasis on the role of language education in further integration. Moreover, a total of 8 language learning classes were observed at a private university in a provincial city in Japan in November 2014. The results from these preliminary class observations clarified the direction of this study.

4. Results

Findings

To elicit and understand the relationship between international students' proficiency in the Japanese language and their perceptions toward personal relationships in Japan, several structured questions (a list of questions is given in the Method section) were asked to Group I (students who had just arrived) and Group II (students who had stayed in Japan for a period of time). Follow-up improvised questions (such as "Can you give me a concrete example?") were added when considered necessary.

Students discussed various impressions toward personal relationships in Japan. Most students had multiple answers. Through subsequent iterations of data analysis, each student's remarks which had similar codes were grouped together in one category. For example, students' responses such as "…I don't understand what they really think," "I cannot get what they think about me," and "…their body language and everything else say differently" imply difficulty in understanding what Japanese really think, so these responses were sorted into the same code (Difficulty in Understanding). Also such remarks as "…even if you are angry with someone, you never start screaming" and "Japanese really don't show affection" allude to Japanese tendency to restrain emotions, so these remarks fell into another code (Restraining Emotions). Subsequently both of these two codes were grouped into the category ' "low-keyed" communication' where interviewees perceive the contradictions between remarks or façade and inner feelings (This procedure was followed in all data analyses in this study).

4.1 Comparison of Group I and Group II in perceptions toward personal relationships in Japan

Tables 1 and 2 show differences between Groups I and II in perceptions toward personal relationships in Japan.

Table 1 **Comparison of Group I and Group II in perceptions toward personal relationships in Japan**
<The total number of interviewees who referred to each category> (multiple responses)

	Group I (n=11)	Group II (n=9)
Prudent interactions / Modesty	9 (81.8%)	6 (66.7%)
"Low-keyed" communication	7 (63.6%)	9 (100%)
Desire for integration		4 (44.4%)
Interdependent relationships		3 (33.3%)

Table 2 Detailed comparison of Group I and Group II in perceptions toward personal relationships in Japan

＜Frequently pointed out features in each category＞ (multiple responses)

Prudent interactions / Modesty: Difficulty in initiating relationships (Group I) – Necessity of thinking in using the language (Group II)	
Group I (n=11)	**Group II (n=9)**
1. quietness in public places (n=5) 2. staying to oneself (n=2) ・difficulty/taking time in initiating relationships (n=2) ・taking more time to build relationships (n=2)	1. avoidance of saying "No"/modest way of refusing (n=5) 2. saving face (n=3) 3. shyness (n=2) ・necessity of thinking before talking (n=2)
"Low-keyed" communication: Contradictions between remarks/façade and inner feelings – Difficulty in understanding what's in mind	
Group I (n=11)	**Group II (n=9)**
1. not showing affection in public (n=3) 2. trying to stifle emotions (n=2) ・avoiding saying "No" (n=2) ・difficulty in understanding what Japanese really think in mind (n=2)	1. dissembling of real feelings (n=7) 2. restrain emotions (n=3) 3. what is said is not necessarily what is meant (n=3) ・not open hearted (n=3) ・mask/veil (n=3) 4. always smiling (n=2)
Desire for integration: International students as guests	
	Group II (n=9)
	1. feeling of a lack of integration (n=4)
Interdependent relationships	
	Group II (n=9)
	1. changing tone of voice (n=2) 2. tendency to follow others (n=2)

*The numerals that follow each feature indicate the total number of students' responses referred to the feature.

*Features referred to more than once are shown.

4.2 Comparison of Group I and Group II in perceptions toward difficulties in communicating in the Japanese language

Tables 3 and 4 show the differences in difficulties in communicating in the Japanese language.

Table 3 Comparison of Group I and Group II in difficulties in communicating in the Japanese language

＜The total number of interviewees who referred to each category＞ (multiple responses)

	Group I (n=11)	Group II (n=9)
Sentence structure	9 (81.8%)	2 (22.2%)
Context-based language / Indirectness	8 (72.7%)	9 (100%)
Relationship-based language	6 (54.5%)	8 (88.9%)

Table 4 Detailed comparison of Group I and Group II in difficulties in communicating in the Japanese language <Frequently pointed out features in each category> (multiple responses)

Sentence structure: Most of the important information such as the verb comes at the end of the sentence in the Japanese language.	
Group I (n=11)	**Group II (n=9)**
1. verb-final (n=8) 2. position of important information such as main clause and affirmation/denial (n=5) 3. missing the important message (n=3) 4. taking time in making sentences (n=2)	1. position of important information (n=2)
Context-based language / Indirectness: Meaning depends on the context rather than the words themselves	
Group I (n=11)	**Group II (n=9)**
1. lack of the subject (n=4) 2. indirectness (n=3) 3. expecting the hearer to understand (n=2) ・difficulty in getting used to indirectness (n=2) ・change of meanings depending on the context (n=2)	1. indirectness (n=9) 2. roundabout way of saying (n=5) 3. what Japanese say is not necessarily what they really mean (n=2) ・deflection in questions (n=2) ・change of meaning depending on the context (n=2) ・poetry-like language (n=2) ・interesting to guess the real meaning (n=2)
Relationship-based language: Language usage changes depending on personal relationships	
Group I (n=11)	**Group II (n=9)**
1. *keigo* or polite language (n=5) 2. many levels of politeness or respect (n=5) 3. suffixes and honorific titles which changes depending of relationships (n=2)	1. *keigo* or polite language (n=6) 2. difficulty in choosing appropriate words (n=5) 3. many levels of politeness or respect (n=4) ・change of word itself depending on personal relationships (n=4) 4. caring about age (n=3) 5. desire of choosing appropriate *keigo* (n=2) ・necessity of thinking before talking (n=2) ・variety of "I", the first person pronoun (n=2) ・necessity of using *keigo* in personal relationships (n=2) ・feeling of distance by knowing *keigo* (n=2)

*The numerals that follow each code indicate the total number of students' responses referred to the feature.
*Features referred to more than once are shown.

    Perceptions toward personal relationship in Japan were dissimilar in responses in the two groups, and the responses on difficulties in communicating in the Japanese language also differed between the two groups.

    In the next chapter how these changes in perceptions toward personal relationships with Japanese and difficulties in communicating in Japanese could relate to each other will be discussed.

5. Discussion

5.1 Changes in perceptions toward personal relationships in Japan

Table 1 shows changes in perceptions toward personal relationships. Table 2 details changes in perceived features in each category.

5.1.1 Prudent interactions or modesty

Prudency or modesty was perceived differently by the two groups. Students in Group I pointed out quietness in public places most frequently, and observed Japanese people keep to themselves.

"In Italy in buses and elevators we start to talk. We love to know other people. … Here nobody talk. I noticed it. " (K, Italy)

"Here I just found that people are just stay to themselves and don't really come up to other people. … I tried to say like "Hello", but they don't see me. …" (O, USA)

Students in Group II observed the Japanese modest way of saying "No" or avoidance of saying "No" most frequently.

"… for example, "Do you want to do this?" in Japan, you are more likely to say "Yes" when you mean "No." I think a lot of people that haven't been to Japan just take things as they are said. What is said is what is meant." (A, USA)

Students mentioned that they felt that they need to think more before speaking when using the Japanese language. As Eisenberg (2007) advocates with his theory on the efficacy of ambiguity in communication, the modest or prudent nature of Japanese personal relationships might require more thinking on the part of international students.

From students' responses in Group II it could be inferred that they also noticed the Japanese tendency of avoiding uncomfortable situations in interpersonal relationships.

"… I see their face that I've done something strange and uncomfortable. But they usually won't offer an explanation unless I ask." (A, USA)

While the percentage of interviewees who referred to prudent interactions or modesty was significantly lower in Group II, their remarks indicate that they have internalized their understanding of the Japanese tendency to prudency or modesty.

5.1.2 "Low-keyed" communication

A few students in Group I found that it is difficult to understand what Japanese are actually thinking. Considering their limited experience in communicating with Japanese, this feature in Japanese personal relationships appears to be remarkable.

Students in Group II discussed Japanese people's dissembling of real feelings or restraining of emotions most frequently. They emphasized the contradictions between remarks or façade and inner feelings of Japanese people.

"People in America… if the person is angry, you can tell. But here… even if people are angry, they won't show it." (H, USA)

The percentage of interviewees who referred to "low-keyed" communication was significantly higher in Group II, however, this discrepancy could be explained by the stage they find themselves going through in the process of integration. As the U-curve theory of adaptation explains, people from different cultures go through the phase where they feel discomfort due to the unfamiliarity of surroundings (Martin & Nakayama, 2014). Although

the theory does not define when people might perceive the phase, it could be inferred from Group II students' responses that they were in the phase where they perceived the "low-keyed" nature of communication as somewhat strange or difficult for them to get used to, and that they were trying to make sense of this nature. Students in Group II emphasized this feature because they were concerned the most at that moment of their stay.

Students in Group II discussed two additional features; desire for integration (4 students; 44.4%) and interdependent relationships (3 students; 33.3%).

5.1.3 Desire for integration

Four students in Group II revealed their feeling of lack of integration. Students felt they were treated as guests in Japan. From students' remarks, the following inference could be made: Students had stayed in Japan and learned the Japanese language for a period of time. They discussed their desire of integration because they felt they adapted themselves to Japanese society to some extent and they perceived positive attitudes toward Japanese people and the language.

"Now that my Japanese is improving more, it's more like fun. Because instead of being just like a foreign person, I can sort of go and do the normal things." (C, USA)

"In a way you also want to be integrated here?" (B, France)

"Yeah." (C, USA)

5.1.4 Interdependent relationships

Two students found that Japanese have a tendency to follow others. Two other students noticed that Japanese sometimes change not only words but also tone of voice depending on relationships, which they perceived unfamiliar or somewhat strange.

"You go in a shop, they just speak in a super かわいい (*kawaii*: cute) voice and super respectful. I was just wondering how she sounds in real life. … It's not the way she speaks. Even in a company, a very manly worker, I can hear he puts on very gentle voice. It's like always not themselves. They would not speak like that. … In Sweden everybody has their normal voice, so to speak. … But, I don't blame Japanese people, because it's embedded in culture." (E, Sweden)

As Giles (2005) advocates with his theory on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), in communication there exists constant movement toward (convergence) or away from (divergence) others by changing one's behavior. The above example illustrates that the student perceived the shopkeeper's voice as divergence in Japanese interdependent relationships.

Interviewees' responses seem to capture the essence of a subtle but important feature of Japanese personal relationships. One example is the Japanese tendency to avoid uncomfortable situations in interpersonal relationships by using indirect or euphemistic expressions or by restraining emotions. Interviewees, however, actually noticed the words and façade of Japanese sometimes contradict what Japanese really mean, which made international students confused and ironically engendered even uncomfortable feelings in communicating with Japanese. From this it can be concluded that knowledge of Japanese tendencies toward prudency, modesty, or indirectness could facilitate internalization of their understanding of these tendencies.

5.2 Changes in perceptions toward difficulties in communicating in the Japanese language

Table 3 shows changes in perceptions toward difficulties in communicating in Japanese. Table 4 details changes in perceived features in each category.

5.2.1 Sentence structure

Nine students in Group I (81.8%) cited sentence structure in Japanese as a difficulty in communicating in Japanese. Sentence structure in Japanese has not been discussed in past research on difficulties for international students. These results may be explained by the researcher's emphasis on difficulties in communicating in Japanese in the interview questions rather than mere difficulties in the Japanese language. Most Group I students mentioned that sentence structure in Japanese is completely different from that of their own languages. They emphasized difficulties in figuring out important information waiting for the last word.

"In the Japanese language the verb is always the last. So when I try to listen for the verb I miss the rest of the sentence." (O, USA)

" I sometimes concentrate too much on the first part of the sentence, and I lost the last part, very important part, main part." (K, Italy)

Interestingly international novice learners of Japanese reacted to sentence structure, which would be unnoticeable for Japanese people who take this for granted. Interviewees perceived the less dynamic nature of communication even in sentence structure where most of the important information comes at the end of a sentence.

5.2.2 Context-based language or indirectness

As their Japanese learning progressed, students came to notice indirectness or the context-based nature of the language. As Kindaichi (1975) explains, Japanese tend to restrain asserting their own ideas directly since Japanese people try to save face in interpersonal relationships. As a result, much of the meaning tends to be derived from context. All students in Group II (100%) cited this feature as a difficulty. Although eight students in Group I (72.7%) did mention indirectness, their focus was mainly on lack of subject. Uz (2014) notes that the greater relative use of first person pronouns including subject relates to higher levels of individualism, so lack of subject would be all the more remarkable for novice Japanese learners from individualist cultures.

5.2.3 Relationship-based language

As their Japanese learning advanced further, students noticed that the language has many levels of politeness or respect and that they need to choose appropriate words or expressions in order to build competent interpersonal relationships. Although six students in Group I (54.5%) knew the existence of *keigo* or polite language in Japanese, they had limited experience to learn how to use it in real life. Most students in Group II, however, learned empirically that they need to choose words and expressions depending on relationships in order to communicate competently with Japanese.

5.3 A reciprocal relationship: Changes in perceptions toward personal relationships and difficulties in communicating in the Japanese language

Although the tight knit nature of language and communication makes it difficult to fully distinguish changes in perceptions toward personal relationships and the language, the possibility of a reciprocal relationship will be discussed following these three categories; sentence structure, context-based language or indirectness, and relationship-based language.

5.3.1 A reciprocal relationship: Understanding sentence structure in Japanese and personal relationships in Japan

It could be read from students' responses that understanding sentence structure where important information comes at the end appears to facilitate the grasping of the less dynamic, modest, or indirect nature of personal relationships in Japan.

"In Western style of communication we interrupt very often while others are talking. It's not really interrupting, but a dynamic way of talking. But Japanese always stay silent and you keep listening. You wait until the other person finishes speaking, and then say something. It's a formal politeness, but it is also related to the form of syntax. In the Japanese language the verbs come in the end of the sentence." (M, Italy)

They worried that sentence structure might impede their competent interpersonal relationships with Japanese.

"What I want to say and what I intend to say is in the end of the sentence. I speak slowly, so before I say it Japanese people might think differently. They could think somewhat different from what I wanted to say before I say it." (J, Italy)

It could be inferred that there exists a reciprocal relationship between the understanding of the Japanese modest or prudent nature of personal relationships and learning Japanese sentence structure. Most students in Group II did not cite sentence structure as a difficulty. Fewer students in Group II (66.7%) discussed the Japanese prudent or modest nature of personal relationships, compared to students in Group I (81.8%). These facts also indicate that understanding sentence structure and prudency or modesty positively affect each other. Moreover, it could be read from students' responses in Group II that they cited these features as difficulties all the more because they perceived that they need to think how to communicate beforehand in order to build competent interpersonal relationships. Students' remarks indicate that they have internalized the understanding of prudency or modesty to some extent.

"Before I say something, I would think about what the person would interpret. Before I say something, I think how I react to that. If I say in America, I say what I want. In America I wouldn't think about too much." (D, USA)

This kind of response indicates a somewhat positive attitude toward less dynamic, modest, or indirect nature of personal relationships in Japan.

5.3.2 A reciprocal relationship: Understanding the context-based or indirect nature of the Japanese language and personal relationships in Japan

A recent opinion poll revealed that Japanese people tend to have a dislike for being obtrusive in communication, especially in communicating with people for the first time (The Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2014). From students' responses it could be read that students recognize this tendency to avoid obtrusiveness in communication by using indirect expressions. They noticed that Japanese tend to expect the hearer to understand what they really want to say.

"… One day a Japanese friend wanted to bring me to a castle. Instead of saying like "Do you wanna go to a castle with me?", she started like "Do you like castles?" And I was like "What?" The way you present things is so different. … She didn't ask the real question. It was very interesting to experience." (B, France)

Asking first if the student liked castles should have provided an easy way out when the student wished to refuse from the Japanese point of view, but the international student couldn't grasp the meaning even though having recognized that was not a real question.

Through interactions with Japanese, students appeared to understand the context-based or indirect nature, but have yet to internalize their understanding.

"It's a lot of responsibility in Japan to know what everyone is thinking all the time. If they want to tell you something, you have to tell in America. In America they say "I feel this way", so it's not too hard." (D, USA)

Seven students in Group I (63.6%) also noticed this feature. However, most students in Group II appeared to observe more detailed or profound aspects in personal relationships. In trying to make sense of obscurity in Japanese communication, the international student must think more deeply.

"I understand more, so I understand more the nuances from what someone says or behaves. Before I might have missed it. So I just got the big picture. I choose this word instead of this word which would imply something more. So as I understand more of the language, I understand what they are trying to communicate better." (H, USA)

Students' remarks indicate they are aware that the Japanese prudency or modesty has some connection with the language.

"…I understand some of the ways that's difficult in the language itself to just flatly say "No." In the US you will probably say that it doesn't work for me and give a reason. Instead you can sort of deflect it and make it seemingly inconvenient such other person will offer to change it first. It sort of helps with that communication." (A, USA)

From students' responses it could be inferred that understanding "low-keyed", modest, or prudent nature of personal relationships in Japan and learning the context-based or indirect nature of the language are related to each other. Students in Group II emphasized both the "low-keyed" nature of personal relationships in Japan and the context-based or indirect nature of the language. It appears to take a considerable time for international students from individualist or low-context cultures to internalize the importance of the context in Japanese personal relationships where much of the meaning of communication tend to be indirect and context-based.

Interviewees' responses appear to indicate that interpersonal communication education would be efficacious to understand not only competent interpersonal relationships but also features of the Japanese language. For example, knowledge of Hall's theory (1976) of high and low-context cultures, which defines a high-context culture as being indirect and implicit would help international students to grasp the context-based nature of the Japanese language. Also learning face-negotiation theory which explains cultural differences in responses to conflict (Ting-Toomey, 2005) or Japanese people's tendency of interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) might facilitate understanding the indirect nature of the Japanese language.

5.3.3 A reciprocal relationship: Understanding the relationship-based nature of the Japanese language and personal relationships in Japan

Most students' remarks in Group II indicate that they noticed the necessity of using appropriate *keigo* or polite language for competent interpersonal relationships in Japan.

"Since it's not appropriate in this culture to speak to people who are older than you without using polite forms, you will be looked down, not respecting people. It automatically comes up this sort of feeling, 'how should I speak', which is good." (E, Sweden)

Sometimes they realized that even foreigners need to understand or use polite language in order to build competent interpersonal relationships with Japanese and that polite language is inevitable in Japanese personal relationships.

"When I went to an office, I first told them「すみません。外国人ですから、ゆっくり、簡単なことばを使ってくださいませんか」('I'm a foreigner, so please speak slowly and use easier words'). And nothing happened. They still continued to speak in *keigo*. … You cannot change, even though the customer told you. " (E, Sweden)

They appear to understand the necessity of *keigo*, but still perceive it difficult to use appropriately.

"If somebody speaks very polite Japanese to me, it's a little bit scary. Because then I want to answer in the same Japanese. And I don't want to say anything wrong. So I would think 'What should I say? What should I say?' … Sometimes it's hard to know how." (I, Sweden)

The intricate aspects of personal relationships in Japan sometimes demoralized their Japanese language learning.

"As much as you study every day, every day, and every day, you'll have a situation where all of a sudden you have no idea what's going on, even though you've been studying forever. Because the Japanese language changes depend on relationships." (H, USA)

A recent survey corroborated the importance of *keigo* in Japanese personal relationships. According to an opinion poll on the Japanese language conducted in 2014 by the Agency for Cultural Affairs of the Japanese government, 98.0% of Japanese regard *keigo* as necessary. Their reasons mostly centered on the need to express respectfulness.

Keigo appears to be very difficult for foreigners to learn and use appropriately, so the existence of *keigo* might demoralize Japanese language learners if it is inevitable in order to build competent interpersonal relationships in Japan. However, having better knowledge of the role *keigo* plays in interpersonal communication in Japanese society could encourage learners to make greater efforts.

From students' remarks, the following inference could be made: As their stay in Japan became longer and their Japanese language learning progressed further, students came to empirically understand features of Japanese personal relationships where words and expressions are prudently chosen depending on relationships. Although the students seemed to be not at the point where they could understand or use *keigo* appropriately in their interacting with Japanese people, it is clear that they understood the importance of *keigo* for competent interpersonal relationships in Japan. It appears that learning polite language and their perceptions toward personal relationships did affect each other.

The results of this study could answer the three Research Questions as follows:
International students' responses to Research Question 1 clarified that they perceived three main difficulties; sentence structure, context-based language or indirectness, and relationship-based language. Answers to Research Question 2 proved that students' perceptions toward personal relationships with Japanese did change as their Japanese language ability became higher. Also it was found that there is a reciprocal relationship between changes in perceptions toward personal relationships in Japan and difficulties in communicating in Japanese. Responses to Research Question 3, concerning how changes in perceptions toward personal relationships affected their Japanese language learning, did not point to any clear findings; one respondent had negative perceptions, and the other positive. One student in Group II found it demoralizing to learn the Japanese language once he recognized that intricate personal relationships in Japan require the change of words and expressions depending on relationships. The student who responded positively (also in Group II) discussed the importance of *kanji* (ideogram in Japanese) in communicating in text message in this age of Internet where being able to read and write

kanji is an important part in forming competent interpersonal relationships.

6. Conclusion

This study examined international students' perceptions toward personal relationships in Japan and difficulty in communicating in Japanese. Findings from interviews with 20 international students indicate some interrelationships between language and personal relationships seemingly peculiar to the Japanese context. First, sentence structure itself where much of the important information comes at the end appears to epitomize personal relationships in Japan where less dynamic communication is preferred. Secondly, from interviewees' responses it appears that the context-based or indirect nature of the language also appears to be peculiar to Japanese. This feature of the language also appears to be closely connected to personal relationships in Japan where much of the meaning of communication is indirect and implicit and people tend to avoid uncomfortable situations to save other's face. Finally, the relationship-based nature of the Japanese language was found to be very difficult for international students to acquire and appears to be peculiar to Japanese.

From the interviewees' responses, it could be inferred that the Japanese language epitomizes personal relationships in Japanese society more than English or other European languages do in the Euro-American contexts. Accordingly, Japanese language education might require somewhat different educational strategies from those used in other language education. The most efficacious Japanese language education would be a collaboration of language and interpersonal communication education.

There was one limitation to this study.

The interviewees in this study were solicited from international students who were studying the Japanese language in Japan. It is natural for students to have positive attitudes toward Japanese language learning, so they might take it as challenging or interesting even if they perceive difficulties in communicating in Japanese with Japanese people.

"Japanese sometimes don't complete their sentences to the end. This is very interesting. … Japanese omit the subject. It sounds like a poem. I have to find the meaning. … That's why I'm interested in Japanese." (F, Italy)

If the interviewees had been students who were learning the Japanese language as a compulsory subject in their own countries, the results could have been very different.

This study glimpsed at the reciprocal relationship between communicative or perceptual competence and linguistic competence in the Japanese context. In order to understand the building of competent interpersonal relationships in Japan for international students more profoundly, future research should examine if there exists a tighter reciprocal relationship between personal relationships in Japan and the Japanese language, which would corroborate the efficacy of interpersonal communication education in Japanese language educational programs. Future research should also extend applied communication research in educational contexts by exploring how interpersonal communication education could facilitate language learning in general.

Although this study could not fully explain the relationship between competent interpersonal relationship and language, this student's remark might provide a hint.

"… when I speak Japanese with the Japanese person and they understand me, I feel closer. The relationship feels much closer

and it feels warmer when I speak Japanese with the Japanese person, even if the vocabulary is less. When I speak English, I feel like 「やっぱり外国人」("I am a foreigner after all"). When I speak Japanese, we become closer." (I, Sweden)

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