論文

Listening to Learners' Voices: Towards an Identification of EFL Instructional Priorities: A Descriptive Study of Japanese University Students' Communication Problems[1]

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1. Introduction and Background of the Study

There has been an increasing interest both among learners and teachers in Japan in developing competence in English oral communication, particularly following the publication by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of *An Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities"* in 2002 (MEXT, 2002). However, as I have noted elsewhere (Sato, 2005, 2008), there is a lack of empirical investigation into the oral communication behaviour of Japanese EFL learners. Past studies have typically focused on the analysis of linguistic mistakes in monologue or role-play (e.g. Taura, 1998; Thompson, 2001), or pragmatic deviations from NS norms/models that appeared in written role-play questionnaires (e.g. Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Narita & Young, 1994). These mistakes or deviations "have regularly been regarded as communicatively disruptive regardless of whether they actually caused trouble or not, ... or caused major disruption at the interpersonal or transactional level" (Kasper, 1997: 355-356).

This situation is unsatisfactory since only the views of researchers or observers, as opposed to the communicators, have been presented, despite the fact that the former may be different from those of the communicators, who are engaged in the collaborative process of meaning making. In particular, the investigation of communication problems experienced by L2 learners themselves has been one of the most neglected areas in L2 speaking research. Apart from some small-scale studies such as Robinson (1991) and Dornyei and Kormos (1998), it has been only marginally addressed in works on oral communication in general (e.g. Brown & Yule, 1983; Bygate, 1987; Widdowson, 1989) and on communication strategies (CSs) (e.g. Faerch & Kasper, 1983) or mentioned in theoretical terms (e.g. de Bot, 1992; Johnson, 1996; Levelt, 1989). Moreover, learners' performances in non-authentic / non-interactive tasks could be different from those taking part in authentic interactive tasks (Beebe & Cummings, 1985, cited in Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Ellis, 2001: 4; McDonough, 1995).

Furthermore, each of the past bodies of research has tended to focus on a narrow area (e.g. linguistic errors, socio-pragmatic inappropriacies). Although such a specific

focus permits detailed and thorough investigations into each area, it misses the complex and dynamic nature of oral communication and fails to provide a holistic view of L2 oral communication problems. The investigation of communicative problems with a broad scope carries significant implications for EFL oral communication instruction in that it would provide insights into areas where learners need help most. As Yoshida (2003: 2) suggests, identifying priorities is particularly important in the FL environment where the exposure to the target language tend to be extremely limited and the development of all-round competence can be very difficult.

Thus, the present study aims to identify the areas of priority for EFL instruction by examining, on a broad basis, communicative problems as experienced by learners during actual interaction.

2. Research Question and Definitions of Key Concepts

Among the research questions addressed in this study, the following is relevant to this paper:

> *What communication problems do Japanese university EFL learners experience in orally interacting with a native speaker (NS) interlocutor?*

In this study, a communication problem experienced by a learner (LCP) is defined as:

> what was recognised by the learners as a difficulty in conveying their intention or maintaining interaction due to the insufficiency of his/her knowledge or means which can reasonably be put to use under the prevailing situational and psychological conditions.

Thus, an LCP is concerned with the learners' psychological experience, and not with errors or non-native-like features in their performance. In the above definition, the areas of knowledge are not restricted to those that are L2-specific, but include all factors involved in communication (e.g. topical knowledge), such as those present in the frameworks of communicative competence suggested by Canale and Swain (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980) and Bachman and Palmer (1996). In addition, following Canale (1983), "intention" refers to "conceptual, sociocultural, affective and other content" (Canale, 1983: 4), and "psychological conditions" includes processing demands and nervousness felt by the L2 learner.

3. Method

3.1 Performance data elicitation task

One-to-one oral proficiency interviews (OPIs) of approximately 15 minutes, each between a NS and a learner, were chosen for the performance data elicitation tasks, as these seemed to strike a balance among the competing criteria of authenticity, interactiveness, feasibility, elicitability, controllability and assessability[2], factors which

are considered important in obtaining the data sought in this study. Among validated OPI formats, Part 1 of the speaking test of the Preliminary English Test (PET) and Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) (Cambridge ESOL, 2001) were selected as the bases for designing the task, as these best met the above-mentioned criteria. It should be mentioned that some major modifications were made to the formats to suit the present study[3], and, as a result, the same degrees of reliability and validity as the original FCE and PET tests are not claimed in this study.

The OPI consisted of three main phases in order to familiarise the learner with the situation and to elicit different types of interaction and utterances on different types of topics. The topics and sample questions were mainly based on Part 1 of the speaking tests of FCE and PET (Cambridge ESOL, 2001), where learners are asked to talk about simple and familiar topics, such as their home town, family, hobbies and English study. In addition, a question regarding Japanese festivals was included in order to elicit more extended utterances on a socio-cultural topic. The topics and sample questions, together with the corresponding phases, were provided in the interviewer guidelines. Interviewer behaviour, such as the amount and type of support, was also controlled by the use of an interviewer frame. This frame also instructed the NS to pretend that she did not understand any Japanese and was unfamiliar with Japanese accent and culture. The OPI was video-recorded and used in the subsequent retrospective verbal report (RVR) sessions (see below). The OPI was also observed by the researcher who took notes on salient features (e.g. signs of potential problems in the performance), which were to be explored in the RVR sessions. In order to minimise observer effects, the researcher was sitting some distance behind the learner. The OPI data, both audio and visual, were later transcribed for analysis.

3.2 Retrospective verbal reports (RVRs)

The retrospective verbal report (RVR) technique was used to obtain detailed information about the communication problems encountered by the learners, defined as psychological experience and therefore often unobservable in the performance data. In order to minimise the drawbacks of this method, and maximise the reliability, validity and completeness of the data, the researcher mainly followed suggestions made by Poulisse, Bongaerts and Kellerman (1987) (see also Ericsson & Simon, 1993, and Cohen, 1998, for further discussion of this issue). The RVR session was conducted by the researcher on a one-to-one basis immediately after each OPI, in Japanese. Each learner was asked to recall and verbalise his/her thoughts and feelings during the OPI, with a special focus on communication problems.

Two types of RVRs, "General" and "Specific", were elicited to obtain different types of information. At the beginning of RVR sessions, the learners were asked, without recall cues, to comment on their overall impressions of the task as a whole (General RVRs). In particular, the learners were prompted to comment on the factors that caused most serious communication problems during the whole interaction (General LCPs). They were allowed to comment on as many General LCPs as they

experienced. General comments elicited without memory-retrieval cues are said to be less valid and reliable than those on specific features elicited with prompts (Ericsson & Simon, 1993), and the results should be treated with caution. However, this process was considered necessary to obtain spontaneous comments on experiences that were of particular psychological salience or importance to the learners and/or about the cumulative effect of multiple instances of LCPs. On the other hand, the video recordings of the OPIs were used as prompts in eliciting the Specific RVRs that followed, which aimed to obtain comments on specific instances of LCPs (Specific LCPs), irrespective of their relative gravity and salience. The researcher played the video and the participants were instructed to request that the video be stopped when they wanted to make any comments. In addition, when it was felt the participants were not verbalising enough, the researcher stopped the video and prompted verbalisation by asking indirect questions such as "What were you thinking about?" Special care was taken not to ask leading questions such as "Were you looking for an English word there?"

The RVR sessions, which lasted approximately 55 minutes on average, were audio recorded and later transcribed. The transcripts were then analysed and both types of LCPs were classified into different areas (e.g. Linguistic, Socio-Pragmatic) and sub-areas (e.g. Lexis, Grammar), using the theoretical frameworks of communicative competence suggested by Canale and Swain (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980) and Bachman and Palmer (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996). However, in order to ensure a purely descriptive analysis, individual categories of LCPs were developed as they emerged from the data (e.g. *lack of L1-culture-specific lexis*).

3.3 Learners

Due to the time-consuming data collection and analysis procedures, the sample size is limited. A total of thirty-two first and second year Japanese university students of approximately intermediate level written English ability[4] participated in the study. An equal number of male and female students between eighteen to twenty years of age were selected from three major disciplines (engineering, social science, humanities), according to the representative profile developed through a large-scale pre-study questionnaire survey[5] (see Table 1 below for the breakdown of the participants). The assessment of the OPI performance by the NS interlocutor (see below) indicates that these learners' oral communication ability ranges from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) on the PET scale, with the mean of 2.84 (sd: 1.22) where Score 3 epitomises the standard required for a satisfactory performance equivalent to PET level[6].

Table 1: Learner Participants (n=32)

Field of Study / Sex	Engineering	Social Science	Humanities		Total
			Non-English	English	
M	4	4	4	4	16
F	4	4	4	4	16
Total	8	8	8	8	32

3.4 NS interlocutor

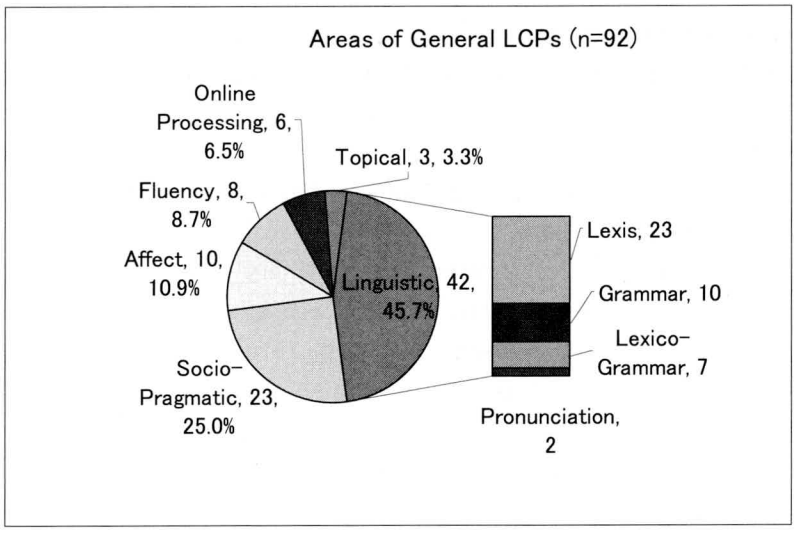
In order to minimise interlocutor variables, only one NS who was unknown to all the learners was selected (a qualified and experienced female oral examiner of the Cambridge ESOL examinations). The role of the interlocutor was extremely important in this study in that he/she needed to elicit parallel data from all learners, which were adequate in both amount and content, as well as evaluate the learners' performance in a reliable manner and provide detailed RVRs[7]. Therefore, although the researcher was fully aware that the perception of such an expert interviewer might be different from that of a "naive" NS, the advantages of using an expert NS outweighed the disadvantages. The NS selected did not speak or understand much Japanese and was not overly familiar with Japanese culture, despite the fact that she had been living in Japan.

4. Results

4.1 General LCPs: Communication problems that hindered communication most seriously in the interaction

A total of 92 instances[8] of General LCPs were identified in all 32 learners' General RVRs (mean frequency: 2.88; sd: 1.39[9]).

Figure 1: Areas of General LCPs: Frequency



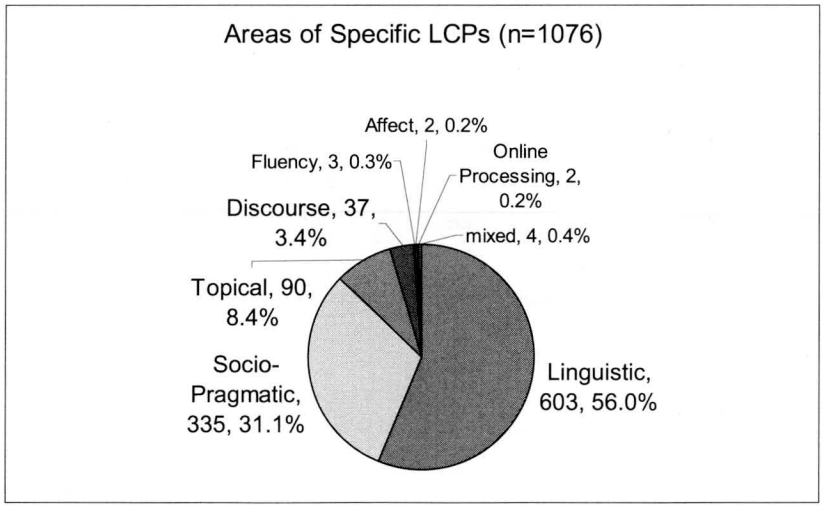
The area where General LCPs were identified most frequently was Linguistic[10], receiving more than 45% of all the comments (see Figure 1 above). The majority were related to Lexis, of which many were concerned with the lack of lexis (e.g. "*Lack of vocabulary was the biggest problem for me.*"[11]), but the lack of access to known lexis (e.g. "*I often couldn't remember words I really know.*") was also commented on. Other linguistic features were commented on relatively infrequently. The area that received comments second most frequently was Socio-Pragmatic. Many were concerned with the difficulty in finding contextually appropriate ways to refer to L1-culture-specific

concepts, not because of linguistic deficits but because of unshared background knowledge (e.g. *"It was difficult to explain what I know and the other person doesn't. It was hard to explain what exists only in Japan."*). The lack of contextually appropriate content was also mentioned occasionally (e.g. *"I was at a loss when asked about the place I live because there's nothing special there."*). The next three areas received comments much less frequently, although approximately 20% to 30% of the learners felt that factors such as nervousness and lack of confidence (Affect), dysfluency (Fluency) and the cognitive demands of online processing (Online Processing) posed major problems in the interaction. Hardly any learners felt that a lack of Topical Knowledge caused major problems. None commented on factors related to Discourse.

4.2 Specific LCPs: Individual instances of communication problems experienced during the interaction

A total of 1076 instances of Specific LCPs were identified across all the 32 learners, with an average of over 30 instances per learner (mean frequency: 33.63; sd: 9.76).

Figure 2 : Areas of Specific LCPs (Total) : Frequency

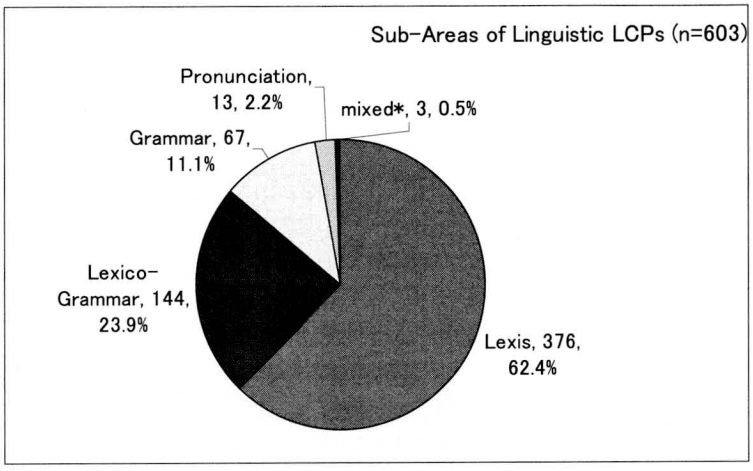


Specific LCPs were identified in seven areas and a combination of more than one area (see Figure 2 above). The majority of instances were Linguistic LCPs, followed by Socio-Pragmatic LCPs, together accounting for more than 85% of the entire instances. Much less frequent were the LCPs related to Topical Knowledge, which were commented on only occasionally. LCPs in the area of Discourse were identified only infrequently, and those related to Fluency, Affect and Online Processing were extremely rare. In the following, LCPs in the two major areas, Linguistic and Socio-Pragmatic, are discussed in more detail. It should be noted that many of the LCP categories were infrequent and considered idiosyncratic, and only those identified more than 10 times were classified as "major" categories and included in the detailed discussion of individual categories.

4.2.1 Linguistic LCPs

603 instances of Linguistic LCPs were identified across all the 32 learners (mean frequency: 18.84, sd: 7.35), among which the most frequent were those related to Lexis, accounting for more than 60% of all the instances of LCPs in this area (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: Sub-Areas of Linguistic LCPs: Frequency



*Lexis & Pronunciation

A total of 10 categories of Lexical LCPs were identified across all 32 learners (mean frequency: 11.75, sd: 5.35), among which six categories (n=367) were identified more than 10 times (i.e. major categories) (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Major Lexical LCPs

Categories	**Frequency (number of learners)**	**Mean (sd) [N=32]**
lack of (access to) lexis*	166 (31)	3.19 (3.81)
lack of L1-culture-specific lexis	60 (22)	1.88 (1.64)
lack of prompt access to lexis	58 (25)	1.81 (1.45)
uncertainty about the accuracy/comprehensibility of lexis	45 (20)	1.41 (1.32)
wrong lexis (self-initiated)	19 (12)	0.59 (0.88)
wrong lexis (other-initiated)	19 (14)	0.59 (0.76)

*Related to general lexis unless otherwise noted.

All but one major category were related to general, as opposed to technical or culture-specific, lexis, many of which were "basic" words such as *housewife* and *decorate*. By far the most frequently commented on was *lack of (access to) lexis*, accounting for nearly 45% of the entire Lexical LCPs and experienced by all but one learner. The next three categories were much less frequent, experienced by 20 to 25 learners. The second most frequent was *lack of L1-culture-specific lexis* (e.g. *Shinto shrine, rice cake*). This was

followed by *lack of prompt access to lexis* and *uncertainty about accuracy/comprehensibility of lexis*. Words that caused these problems again include basic ones such as *rice, department store* and *throw*. The last two major categories were both related to the own use of wrong lexical items noticed after utterance, either with or without the NS's feedback (*other-initiated* and *self-initiated* respectively). These were experienced by less than half the learners.

Following far behind Lexical LCPs were LCPs in the area of Lexico-Grammar. Lexico-Grammatical LCPs were those related to messages above the lexical, and at or below sentence, level, and typically expressed as difficulty expressing phrases in Japanese (e.g. "*I wanted to say something like 'it's ... a charming town because there are many traditional buildings', but I couldn't.*"). A total of 144 instances of Lexico-Grammatical LCPs were identified across 30 learners (mean frequency: 4.50; sd: 2.91). Three categories were identified, all of which more than 10 times (Table 3 below).

Table 3: Major Lexico-Grammatical LCPs

Categories	**Frequency (number of learners)**	**Mean (sd) [N=32]**
lack of a lexico-grammatical item	99 (28)	3.09 (2.45)
lack of prompt access to a lexico-grammatical item	34 (17)	1.06 (1.27)
uncertainty about the accuracy/comprehensibility of a lexico-grammatical item	11 (8)	0.34 (0.65)

The predominant category was *lack of a lexico-grammatical item*, accounting for nearly 70% of the instances of LCPs in this area. It was experienced by most learners (n=28). This was followed far behind by *lack of prompt access*, which was commented on by a little more than half the learners. The last category, *uncertainty about the accuracy/comprehensibility*, was commented on only by one quarter of the learners.

Interestingly, LCPs clearly related to Grammar, including syntax, function words (e.g. prepositions), morphemic endings (e.g. *-ed, -s*) and phrase structure, were identified infrequently, accounting for only a little more than 10% of Linguistic LCPs. 67 instances were identified across 30 learners (mean frequency: 2.09; sd: 1.69). It should also be noted that the data showed a positive skew with two outliers pulling up the mean figure.

Table 4: Major Grammatical LCPs

Categories	**Frequency (number of learners)**	**Mean (sd) [N=32]**
wrong grammar (self-initiated)	31 (16)	0.97 (1.43)
lack of prompt access to grammar	17 (13)	0.53 (0.72)
uncertainty about the accuracy/comprehensibility of grammar	15 (13)	0.47 (0.62)

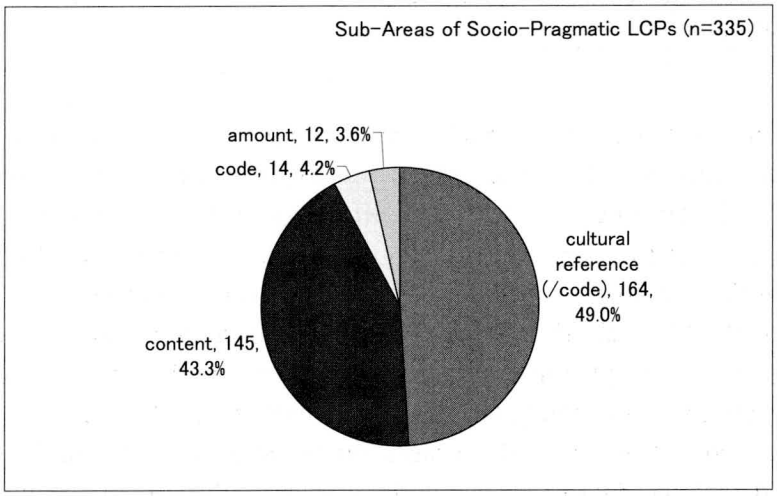
Among five categories identified, three (n=63) were identified more than 10 times (see Table 4 above). The most frequent category, accounting for nearly half the instances of LCPs in this area, was *self-initiated recognition of own wrong grammar*, experienced by half the learners. This was followed far behind by *lack of prompt access* and *uncertainty about the accuracy/comprehensibility*. Most of the problems in this area were concerned with the use of prepositions, subject-verb agreement and verb endings. It is worth noting that *lack of grammar* was identified extremely rarely.

LCPs in the area of Pronunciation were observed only rarely. A total of 13 instances were identified for nine learners (mean frequency: 0.41; sd: 0.84), most of which were related to segmental features of pronunciation. It should be noted that nearly one third of instances (n=4) were identified for one learner, and therefore LCPs in this area can be regarded as idiosyncratic.

4.2.2 Socio-Pragmatic LCPs

A total of 335 instances of Socio-Pragmatic LCPs were identified across all 32 learners, with an average of approximately 10 instances per learner (mean frequency: 10.47, sd: 5.19), although this figure was pulled up by one outlier, who encountered LCPs in this area particularly often. Most were concerned with contextual appropriacy of cultural reference and content (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4: Sub-Areas of Socio-Pragmatic LCPs[12] : Frequency



The widest variety of LCPs was found in this area among all the seven areas of Specific LCPs. A total of 17 categories were identified, of which ten (n=299) more than 10 times (see Table 5 below).

Table 5: Major Socio-Pragmatic LCPs

Categories	**Frequency (number of learners)**	**Mean (sd) [N=32]**
Cult*: inappropriate cultural reference (other-initiated)	70 (24)	2.19 (1.89)
C**: lack of prompt access to appropriate content	58 (22)	1.81 (1.89)
C: uncertainty about the appropriacy of/expected content	38 (17)	1.19 (1.67)
C: lack of appropriate content	32 (14)	1.00 (1.78)
Cult: uncertainty about the appropriateness of cultural reference	27 (13)	0.84 (1.17)
Code/Cult: inappropriate pronunciation of L1 name/word (other-initiated)	17 (11)	0.53 (1.02)
Cult: NS's lack of cultural knowledge (other-initiated)	16 (10)	0.50 (0.84)
Cult: lack of prompt access to appropriate cultural reference	16 (11)	0.50 (0.84)
Cult: lack of appropriate cultural reference	13 (10)	0.41 (0.67)
C: inappropriate content (internal speech)	12 (8)	0.38 (0.75)

* Cult: Cultural Reference
** C: Content

Six were concerned with the appropriateness of Cultural Reference and four with the appropriateness of Content. The most frequent was *other-initiated realisation of inappropriate cultural reference*. This was concerned with the realisation of inappropriacy of Cultural Reference involving the L1 upon the NS's verbal or non-verbal expression of non-understanding. This problem was classified as being related to Cultural Reference since the learners generally expressed the problem as the NS's lack of knowledge of the L1-culture-specific concepts as well as their L1 names, rather than of the L1 words per se[13]. The next three most frequent LCPs were related to the contextual appropriacy of (non-cultural) content. Among them, *lack of prompt access to appropriate content* was experienced by many learners, and *uncertainty about the appropriateness of/expected content* and *lack of appropriate content* were both experienced by about half the learners. The other major LCP related to the appropriacy of Content, *inappropriate content (internal speech)*, was experienced when the learner noticed, before utterance, that the content he/she had in mind was not appropriate in the particular context.

The other five LCPs were related to the appropriacy of Cultural Reference. *Uncertainty about the appropriacy of cultural reference* was experienced by the learners who suspected the possible lack of the NS's cultural knowledge. The other four categories were identified much less frequently and experienced by approximately one third of the learners. *Other-initiated realisation of inappropriate pronunciation of an L1*

name/word was concerned with the learners' realisation of the inadequate clarity of their own pronunciation triggered by the non- or misunderstanding by the NS, due to her unfamiliarity with Japanese names/words. A considerable cross-learner difference was observed for this LCP, as indicated by the very high standard deviation. *Other-initiated realisation of the NS's lack of cultural knowledge* was similar to the most frequent LCP, *inappropriate cultural reference*, in that both are related to the learners' realisation of the NS's lack of cultural knowledge upon her feedback. However, they were made into separate categories because they stemmed from very different mental and interactional processes. Whereas *the NS's lack of knowledge* was triggered by the NS's response to the learners' explicit questions about cultural knowledge (e.g. *"Do you know 'osechi'?"*), *inappropriate cultural reference* was triggered by the NS's non-understanding of the learners' cultural reference in L1 (see above). The next two LCPs were related to the availability of ways to explain Japanese culture-specific concepts in a manner that was comprehensible to the NS lacking in cultural knowledge. It is worth noting that an LCP related to appropriacy of register was identified only once, and no LCP related to speech acts was identified.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results indicated that the learners in this study felt that the deficit in vocabulary was the greatest and most frequent hindrance to communication with the NS interlocutor. Furthermore, the learners often commented on the difficulty of expressing chunks of phrase-level messages. Although such instances were classified separately as Lexico-Grammatical LCPs, a large portion of these messages were related to lexis, and the number of lexical problems was potentially even larger. On the other hand, RVRs revealed that Grammatical LCPs were much less serious and frequent, and Pronunciation LCPs were rare. These findings confirm the central role of lexis in conveying semantic messages and the importance of lexical access in speech production (e.g. de Bot, 1992; Levelt, 1989).

On the other hand, this contradicts the common belief that Japanese EFL learners are over-anxious about the accuracy of grammar and their foreign accent, and this often leads to dysfluency (e.g. Thompson, 2001). This discrepancy may be due to the fact that past studies and observations tended to be based on learners' performance in the classroom, where they may have been more conscious about linguistic accuracy than in this study with its more communicative orientation. In fact, learners' RVRs revealed that more than a third of the learners consciously focused on lexis and deliberately ignored grammatical and phonological factors in order to prioritise the conveyance of main meaning and avoid excessive dysfluency. This indicates that the learners of this study regarded the interaction as an authentic opportunity for meaning exchange rather than a demonstration of linguistic ability. This in turn indicates the possibility of generalising the findings to real-life communication.

A pedagogically important finding was that the majority of Lexical LCPs were caused by the learners' lack of "basic" general vocabulary. This seems to indicate the

urgent need for vocabulary development in EFL education in Japan. On the other hand, some of these items might have been in the learners' receptive vocabulary, the development of which has been the almost exclusive focus of EFL education in Japan due to the emphasis on reading skills. The learners' vocabulary knowledge was not investigated in this study, and further investigation is needed to confirm this. However, it would be reasonable to suggest that there is a need for more emphasis on the development of productive vocabulary through production tasks in order to improve Japanese EFL learners' oral communication ability.

Another important finding was the frequent occurrence of problems in promptly accessing some basic lexical items the learners were able to remember later. This was partly because many of the learners created their messages first in L1 and translated them into L2 word-by-word, and this attention-consuming, "serial" processing made the access to known lexical items slow and difficult under the cognitive pressure of online interaction (Johnson, 1994, 1996; cf. also Levelt, 1989: 24). This was further exacerbated by the negative affective states (e.g. nervousness) caused by the lack of previous experience with one-to-one L2 oral communication. The above findings concur with past finding that FL learners' lexical access tends to be non-automatic due to inadequate practice, and this leads to dysfluent speech production (e.g. Dornyei & Kormos, 1998; Temple, 2000; Towell et al., 1996). The results in turn support claims about the importance of developing *skill* to use *knowledge* in L2 oral communication instruction (Bygate, 1987; Canale, 1983; Johnson, 1996; Widdowson, 1989). The pedagogical implication of this is a need for providing Japanese EFL learners with practice in one-to-one online interaction under what Johnson (1996) termed ROCs (real operation conditions), such as time pressure and a focus on meaning. Such practice would facilitate both the conversion of receptive to productive vocabulary mentioned above and the automatisation of lexical access. Moreover, it would familiarise the learners with this type of interactional setting so that the negative affective reactions, such as nervousness and lack of confidence, could be reduced. The fact that nearly one third of the learners mentioned that such negative affective states seriously hindered communication indicates the importance of dealing with this factor.

The learners also experienced serious and frequent problems of a socio-pragmatic nature irrespective of their linguistic proficiency levels. Many learners found describing Japanese culture very difficult. This was found to be because they lacked previous experience with this topic and therefore did not have the "template" to explain culture-specific concepts (Brown & Yule, 1983: 107), especially in a way that was comprehensible to a NS lacking in cultural knowledge. Furthermore, the difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that the learners often lacked L2 lexical items for L1-culture-specific concepts because these are not often taught in the EFL classroom. Another serious socio-pragmatic problem experienced by several learners was the difficulty of (promptly) finding appropriate content related to seemingly simple personal topics such as family and home town. This was mainly because many learners could not think of "anything special" to talk about on these topics, and were not sure what kind of

information was expected. This was, in turn, again partly due to the learners' lack of previous experience of consciously thinking about these topics, whether in Japanese or in English, precisely because of their familiarity.

The lack of previous experience with L1-culture-related topics and simple personal topics in the EFL classroom seems to be the result of the almost exclusive focus on obtaining "*knowledge about the other*" (Santos, 2007: 37, italics original) through reading, rather than *informing others*. In this respect, Santos's suggestion (2007), inspired by Heath (1983) among others, of using the L2 classroom as an opportunity for the learners to examine their own cultural identity seems very relevant. This approach encourages the learners to "make the familiar unfamiliar" ; that is, reflect on what has been taken for granted and exchange their thoughts in discussion. Practice in these activities would not only raise the learners' socio-cultural awareness but would also naturally help the learners to develop relevant productive vocabulary and ways to explain culture-specific concepts and talk about themselves.

The above findings also have research implications. Communication problems related to cultural reference and personal topics as experienced by the learners have not been reported in past L2 oral communication literature, presumably because of its focus on linguistic errors and deviant speech act realisations. Since these are the kind of topics EFL learners would frequently encounter in situations where they use English as a language of communication, it is an area that needs further investigation. It is worth noting that LCPs related to the appropriacy of speech act realisation, such as those reported by Robinson (1992), were never identified. This may be partly due to the interview format used in this study, which required the learners to perform an extremely limited variety of speech acts (i.e. answering the NS interlocutor's questions). However, this at least points to the inadequacy of the narrow focus on speech acts in past L2 pragmatic research in describing EFL learners' communication problems at least in this type of interactional setting.

This study has some limitations, such as the small sample-size and the use of only one type of interaction task. Nevertheless, it is hoped that it has yielded findings which provide insights into the reality of the oral communication problems of Japanese university EFL learners and the areas of priority for EFL oral communication instruction in Japan.

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Notes

1. This paper is partly based on the author's doctoral thesis, which was accepted by the University of Reading in 2008. This study draws on materials supplied by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, and I would like to express my gratitude to them for their support.
2. Assessability was needed to answer other research questions about the NS perception of the learner performance, which are outside the scope of this paper. See Sato (2005, 2008) for the results concerning the NS perception.
3. For example, the OPI format was converted from a pair to one-to-one interview in order to eliminate any confounding variables of group dynamics, and the phase of uninterrupted long turn was excluded as it is beyond the focus of the present study.

4. None of the participants had any reportable scores of English speaking tests.
5. See Sato (2008) for the design and main results of the survey.
6. As mentioned above, because of the major modifications made to the OPI design, the same degree of validity and reliability as the original PET test are not claimed in this study. It should be mentioned, however, that the inter-rater reliabitliy with two independent British male NSs (with qualifications and substantial experience of Cambridge ESOL examinations [FCE, PET, IELTS]) was highly significant (Co-rater 1: r=.862, p=.000; Co-rater 2: r=820, p=.000).
7. The NS's evaluation of, and RVRs on, learner performance were collected in order to answer research questions related to the interlocutor perception. See Sato (2005, 2008) for the results concerning the NS perception.
8. It should be noted that many learners (n=26) commented on more than one General LCP.
9. All figures of mean frequency and standard deviations appearing in the text are rounded to two decimal places.
10. In the following text, the "areas" (e.g. Linguistic, Socio-Pragmatic) and the "sub-areas" (e.g. Lexis, Cultural Reference) of LCPs are indicated by capitalisation, and categories of LCPs are indicated by italics (e.g. *wrong lexis, inappropriate content*).
11. All sample RVRs were translated into English from Japanese by the researcher.
12. Socio-Pragmatic LCPs are concerned with the contextual appropriacy and classified into the following four sub-areas depending on the factors involved. Cultural Reference: culture-specific concepts, in relation to the NS's (un-)shared cultural knowledge; Content: (non-culture-specific) propositional message; Code: verbal and non-verbal forms (e.g. language variety, register, body language, prosody); Amount: the amount of information/utterance and degree of elaboration.
13. E.g. *"I couldn't think of how to say 'New Year's card' (in English) straight away. I thought she (= the NS) might know it (i.e. the Japanese word *nengajo* the learner used), but … she reacted like 'M?'…."* On the other hand, when learners used general L1 words (e.g. **nijuman** [two-hundred thousand]) and felt that the NS's non-understanding was caused by the use of inappropriate language, it was classified as *inappropriate code.*

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