Pragmatic Failure in Topic Choice, Topic Development, and Self-Disclosure by Japanese EFL Speakers

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This study investigates communication difficulties encountered by Japanese EFL speakers in interacting with native English speakers they first meet. The in-depth analysis of natural conversation data reveals that the Japanese EFL speakers are not able to carry on a conversation smoothly with the American English native speakers although all the Japanese participants have an advanced English proficiency level. Their failure may be caused by their transfer of Japanese communication styles into English conversations. North American English speakers elaborate on topics through co-construction by asking and answering questions and making clear topic shifts, while Japanese speakers tend to give less information and their topic shifts are less clear, resulting in less self-disclosure.

Many research papers and anecdotes have indicated that native speakers of Japanese are not able to take an active role in English interactions with native speakers of English. Recently, Terauchi, Koike, and Takata (2008) concluded a survey about the linguistic problems of around 7,000 Japanese people in daily work situations. All those surveyed had high Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores as required in their work situations. Many of them stated in a questionnaire that they often ended up in a listener's role in English interactions with native English speakers, even though they did not wish to or that they could not find an opportunity to take turns to speak. As a result, talk tended to be dominated by native English speakers, causing undesirable negotiation outcomes.

What inhibits Japanese people from interacting actively with native English speakers even when they have a good command of English? Why are they forced to take a listener's role even when they do not wish to? Does possible shyness on this part of the Japanese people explain the situation as some researchers claim?

Spencer-Oatey (2002) claims that culture-specific expectations and conventions can lead to different ways of constituting rapport, which can cause an interpretation gap that may cause problems in intercultural communication. She also states that different pragmatic rules may be blamed for cross-linguistic/cross-cultural communication difficulties.

Previous research in discourse analysis has revealed that different pragmatic rules are employed in English and Japanese conversations (e.g., Otani, 2009; Watanabe, 1993). Thus, different pragmatic rules in English and Japanese may cause cross-linguistic/cross-cultural communication difficulties when Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) speakers interact with native English speakers in English (Shigemitsu, 2005). Iwata (2009) revealed that the native English speakers in her data co-constructed conversations with their conversation partners. As speakers, they tried to choose appropriate topics and elaborated on topics by disclosing information about themselves. They talked about their private lives and

personal opinions to those they first met. As listeners, they tried to show their interest and involvement by asking questions and giving feedback/comments. As participants, they collaborated, co-constructed conversations, and made clear topic shifts. Thus, these speakers seemed to share speaker and listener roles evenly. On the other hand, the Japanese speakers in her data tended to give less information and their topic shifts were less clear, resulting in less self-disclosure. Therefore, it is highly possible that Japanese EFL speakers fail to converse with native English speakers efficiently, because they are not able to use the above strategies as well as native English speakers do.

The purpose of this study is to investigate why and what kinds of communication difficulties Japanese EFL speakers have in interacting with native English speakers. The study specifically investigates how Japanese EFL speakers attempt or fail to collaborate in conversations with native English speakers. The study focuses on topic choice, topic development, and self-disclosure because these play an important role in co-constructing conversations as shown in Iwata's study (2009).

Review of Literature

Researchers in the intercultural communication fields have analyzed relations between culture and communication by comparing Japanese culture with Western culture. Hall (1976), for example, observes that meaning and context are inextricably bound with each other. According to Hall, high-context (HC) communication is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. Low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite—that is to say, the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Although no culture exists exclusively at one end of the scale, some cultures are high while others are low. American culture, while not at the bottom, is toward the lower end of the scale, still being considerably above the German-Swiss, the German, and the Scandinavian, in the amount of contexting needed in everyday life. Hall classifies Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Arabic cultures as LC.

Barnlund (1974) states that cultures differ in the level of talk they approve—which topics can be talked about at which level. He uses the self-disclosure scale as a simultaneous measurement of three variables. The first variable is topics. It explores the degree to which people like to talk about: political, religious, or social issues; interests in food, television, music, and books; work including goals, difficulties, and talents; financial matters including how much money they owe, what their incomes are, how they will live on a budget, and what their savings are; and other personal matters such as how they feel about themselves as a person, what they think are their most important assets and their limitations; and about their physicality such as what they feel about their appearance, their body, their face, their illness, and their sexual behavior. The second variable is the target persons: mother, father, opposite-sex friends, same-sex friends, strangers, and distant acquaintances. Results show that Japanese and American cultures agree almost completely on what people should talk about: food, television programs, books, work, and public opinions. Cultures agree also on what not

to talk about. Both cultures tend not to talk about financial matters, even less about physical attributes and sexual questions. As for the target preferences, Barnlund (1974) finds great similarity between these two cultures. He finds striking and substantial cultural differences in terms of level. How deeply each culture encourages members to reveal themselves in conversation is different. He used four different levels of conversation on a scale of 0, 1, 2, and X. Accordingly, participants marked 0 if they said nothing about this aspect of themselves, 1 if they said things in general about the topic, 2 if they explained things in full detail, and X if they lied or misrepresented themselves. The average disclosure on all topics to all people is 0.75 for Japanese, which is less than general disclosure, and 1.12 for Americans, thus being between general and complete disclosure which is not very high.

Hall (1976) and Barnlund (1974) revealed interesting distinctive features of English and Japanese cultures and communication styles. However, their research did not investigate cross-cultural/cross-linguistic differences at the discourse level.

Among researchers who have conducted contrastive studies between English and Japanese at the discourse level, Sasaki (1994) analyzed conversational styles and rapport-building strategies among three young businesswomen's groups respectively (Japanese, Chinese Singaporeans, and British). Each group was asked to have an informal conversation in Japanese (for the Japanese group) and in English (for the other two groups). Sasaki reported several differences. The Japanese group took much fewer turns than the Singaporean and British groups in a 10-minute conversation, which means, in the first group, one speaker tended to hold a turn longer compared with those in the other two groups. The Singaporean group had a lot more laughter than the other two during their conversation. The British group made a lot more overlaps when taking a turn than the other two groups. In the Japanese group, a turn tended to be given smoothly without any overlaps. The Japanese group gave a lot more back-channels than the other two groups. Sasaki concluded that these differences may lead to some communication difficulties when these three groups meet and have a conversation together.

Watanabe (1993) analyzed seven group discussions, each of which consisted of four participants and investigated the beginning and ending phases of the group discussions in English and Japanese by using framing analysis. She claimed that the American discussants entered and exited the discussion frame promptly while the Japanese discussants began and ended gradually and deliberately. This is because, in the beginning, the Japanese discussants talked about how they would discuss and because, in the end, they assured themselves that they had completed the discussion.

Tsuda, Murata, Otsuka, Hori, Shigemitsu, and Otani (2008) analyzed three English conversations (one dyad and two tetrads) and two tetrad Japanese conversations and investigated conversational features such as co-constructions, back-channels, laughs, pauses, topic shifts, and clarifications by focusing on their functions of building rapport. They found that native Japanese speakers and native English speakers used these features contrastingly. The data analysis showed that native Japanese speakers tended to make use of co-constructions, back-channels, laughs, and pauses to build or maintain rapport in Japanese

conversations. On the other hand, native English speakers tended to avoid long pauses and instead shifted topics to sustain conversations.

Otani (2009) compared discourse organizations along the flow of the topics in two English conversations (one dyad and one triad) and seven Japanese conversations (two dyads and four triads). Based on methods of interpretative sociolinguistics, she claimed that, in Japanese conversations, a main speaker continues to talk about a topic while the others listen, which resulted in quite uneven distribution of talk among the speakers. On the other hand, in English conversations, the distribution of talk is even among the speakers and they take turns and co-construct conversations about a topic.

Previous research investigated communication difficulties which may be caused by different pragmatic rules. Shigemitsu (2005) investigated two English conversations (one dyad and one tetrad) between/among Japanese EFL speakers and native English speakers by using the methods of interpretative sociolinguistics. She found a clear contrast in the communication patterns. According to Shigemitsu, native English speakers tended to be more talkative than their Japanese counterparts. English speakers also tended to ask a lot of questions while Japanese participants tended to avoid asking questions. Moreover, English informants tended to change topics quite often while their Japanese counterparts tended to avoid involvement in the topics. Japanese people tended to expect English speakers to understand what they meant without saying enough. English speakers tended to maintain an equal status among the participants while Japanese speakers tended to follow a hierarchical relationship. Shigemitsu concluded that these differences led to dissatisfaction or frustration on both sides, especially for the English speakers. They felt that they did not get enough feedback from the Japanese counterparts and were irritated that the Japanese speakers took a listener's role and did not get actively involved in the conversation.

Based on the above previous research, this paper investigates what kinds of difficulties Japanese EFL speakers may have in choosing topics and elaborating topics in dyad or three-person conversations with native English speakers. The study also focuses on what extent self-disclosure is made by Japanese speakers. In the analyses, the following questions are discussed:

RQ1: What kinds of topics do participants prefer to choose?
RQ2: How do Japanese EFL speakers try to elaborate topics?
RQ3: How much self-disclosure is observed?

Method

The conversations I analyzed in this paper are part of a corpus of videotaped data which includes dyads, and four-person conversations between/among Japanese speakers, between/among native English speakers, and between/among Japanese EFL speakers and North American English speakers. The JACET Chubu Chapter Politeness Research Group, to which I belong, has collected both Japanese and English conversational data to conduct contrastive study of pragmatic rules and communication strategies employed to build rapport

in conversations with those they first meet. We have also collected intercultural data between/among Japanese EFL speakers and native English speakers to investigate Japanese EFL speakers' communication difficulties and their pragmatic failures (Tsuda et al., 2008; Tsuda, Murata, Otsuka, Otani, Shigemitsu, & Iwata, et al., 2009; Tsuda, Otsuka, Murata, & Shigemitsu, 2008).

I chose two English conversations for this study. The American English speakers in the data did not have as much experience in interacting with Japanese people in English as many native English speakers who teach English to Japanese people. Therefore, the data seem to typically reveal Japanese EFL speakers' pragmatic failure while interacting with native English speakers. The conversations chosen are between/among Japanese EFL speakers and American English speakers living in Japan. The participants in the data were asked to engage in a 30-minute conversation about their own individual intercultural experiences when they meet someone for the first time. The first data set is about conversations among two Japanese university professors (J4 and J5) and two American businessmen (A4 and A5). J4 and J5 are in their forties and are confident enough in English to give presentations in English at overseas conferences. A4 is in his forties and works as a contracting officer in a U.S. base in Kanagawa. A5 is in his sixties and is a college professor at a U.S. base in Kanagawa. The second data set is about conversations between a Japanese businessman in his early forties (J3) and an American businessman in his fifties (A3). J3 makes a lot of overseas business trips, frequently attends business meetings in English, and often writes business documents in English. A3 works as a clerk at a U.S. base in Kanagawa. The conversations were video-taped, transcribed, and analyzed. The analysis is based on methods of interpretative sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982). Furthermore, I refer to ethnographic knowledge as well as to the interpretations of the participants themselves. We conducted follow-up interviews with the participants after the video-recordings.

This study is based on the case study method, because it seeks to consider the "potential for learning" instead of the "criterion of 'representativeness'" (Stake, 1994, p. 234). Johnstone (1996) claimed that the goal of discourse analysis was to "understand the data, rather than to prove or disprove preformulated hypotheses or to create general predictive models" (p. 24). According to Varenne (1992), the analyst can "discern echoes of patterns that are far from local" (p. 127) by examining local patterns in the case study.

Findings

Topic Choice and Self-Disclosure

The following data is an excerpt from a tetrad English conversation between two American and two Japanese speakers of English. From the beginning, the conversation was dominated by the two American speakers, A4 and A5. In other words, they talked a lot more than the two Japanese speakers, J4 and J5. As shown in the data below, A4 and A5 not only talked a lot but also talked about their own personal matters such as their family and marriage. For example, A5 revealed that his wife was Japanese and that his wife's two sisters

were also married to non-Japanese men, Thai and British. Towards the end of his turn, he talked about Japanese peoples' life and working styles including their long commuting time on packed trains. A4 started to talk about his experience when he was living in Kitakamakura. He mentioned Japanese businessmen having to stand all the way to Tokyo in crowded trains to which A5 responded by saying that was why he liked driving instead of taking trains. Then, J5 asked a very unusual question in turn 129, "Is that a reason why your wife choose foreigner, not Japanese husband?" This question is far from being acceptable in this context for two reasons. First, the question was asked at an inappropriate time. At that moment, A4 and A5 had already changed the topic from their family to Japanese businessmen who had to commute on packed trains. Therefore, this question was not related to the current topic. Moreover, this question was too personal and too private, which touched the core of A5's relationship with his wife. This could have threatened their privacy. The video data shows that A4 and A5 were quite annoyed and embarrassed by this question.

However, the extent to which we can expect others to disclose information about themselves varies from culture to culture. It is very difficult to understand the norms across cultures. In the conversation in question, as previously mentioned, A5 revealed that his wife was Japanese and that his wife's two sisters were also married to non-Japanese men, Thai and British, adding that none of them married Japanese. In Japanese culture, we probably seldom reveal our marital life to this extent to someone we have just met. Since A5 exposed his marital life far beyond what we would expect according to Japanese norms, J5 may have misunderstood that asking the reason why his wife chose him was also acceptable.

[Excerpt 1]

125A4: The reason I asked is last summer I was in Xian, North Western Art and Technical <J4: yes> to teach English, a . . . I thought that they have . . . I found it interesting that a lot of Japanese interested in learn Chinese, a lot of Chinese interested in learning English. I was looking forward to going back to this summer, because of the SARS, they canceled the program. I'm not worried but other people are, I refused to ~~ fears, but other people are afraid of the SARS—

126A5: Right, getting back to the cultural theme, my wife is Japanese, she has two other sisters and one of them is married to Thai, and the other one married to British. None of them married to Japanese. And that is very, kind of strange, I think. And I guess, a long time ago, I think it would have been hard, because you know you hear a lot of but I had been here since 1990 so I'd been around here for thirteen years. And I know some of old tradition, of male society, and the women's roles, and I'd seen it changed, since I'd been here, and coming from the United States, this is just me speaking, the progress has made, to me, I . . . women are like priority, ichiban and kids, work comes in second, in Japan, some companies, and by choice and by no choice, sometimes the job comes before the family because you got to have the money, and you gotta make . . . you know, because you gotta go to Tokyo, it's a long

train trip and you gotta come back, it depends on where you live. A lot people commute, that's why you are packed in. So you spend a lot of hours and we can probably talk about this all day.

127A4: I know at one time I lived in Kita Kurihama and I went on the train anytime you have to fight all night was standing room to Ginza, all salary men are in order to commute. As you know, it's so expensive to live in Tokyo. Long commutes—

128A5: That is why I like driving. I try to drive to anywhere I go. In that way I learn area, too…

129J5: Is that a reason why your wife choose foreigner, not Japanese husband?

130A5: Um . . . what's that? Because of the . . . no, I don't think—

131J5: Because of the that? Problem . . . . <A4: laugh>

132A5: Well her father did work in Tokyo, and then he worked, also in Fukushima prefecture two years and he had to live there because too parties commute Machida and he would never come home but his wife always visit but he never come home. So the mother was basically raising them for few years. So they didn't see their father. So mother he would say come and visit me and I don't know that's the reason or not, you know. It's hard to say, maybe it's just overwhelmingly charming.

133A4: <J4, J5 laugh>

134A4: You are very ginki, ha haha, <A5: laugh> (pause) but I remember when I first came to Japan . . . it was very unusual to see American men and Japanese women were married. When I was at Atsugi, we had one person, he was an American and he had married a woman from Iwakuni, very charming, very intelligent, but her family was very unhappy because she married to an American.

135A5: Now, I have a similar experience dating a girl, because I'm American, they don't like it. But there are a lot of other people that had no problem with it but to me her family did not like it. It was okay to date, but they did not want other serious that is out of the question. I kind of thought I didn't like that. And to me, I think anybody doesn't matter who you are black or white or between, Japanese, Chinese, and you wanna marry somebody, it shouldn't be a problem. Don't you agree? (looking at J5)

136J5: Yeah. (nods)

The above conversation also shows an asymmetrical relationship between Japanese speakers and American English speakers in terms of amount of talk and turn-taking. Although this conversation was between two Americans and two Japanese men, the American speakers tended to take turns most of the time, keep the turns, and talk in great length, having the two Japanese speakers take a listener's role. At the follow-up interview, the Japanese participants confessed that they had enjoyed listening to the talk between the two American speakers. They seemed to have transferred Japanese communication styles to understand their role in which one speaker is allowed to dominate the conversation while the others take a listener's role.

Frequent Topic Change and Different Expectations

The following data is an excerpt from an English conversation between one Japanese speaker of English and one American English native speaker. Throughout the conversation, the Japanese speaker of English, J3, tended to take a passive role as a listener. Moreover, quite often he was asked questions by his partner, A3. J3 seemed to be busy with answering the questions A3 asked him. In the follow-up interview, A3 said that he had asked many different questions during the conversation because he had been trying to find a topic which seemed to be interesting to J3.

In the following excerpt, A3 seems to have taken on the responsibility of finding appropriate topics to talk about while J3 took a passive role in the conversation. A3 frequently changed the topic and, as soon as he felt the topic did not work, he asked new questions to J3, who did not (or could not) elaborate on A3's topics. As a result, A3 asked new questions until he thought he had found a good topic (in turns 219, 223, 225, 227, and 237).

[Excerpt 2]

217A3: So yeah, when I– I go to– see like, Denny's or anything and order, I'm thinking like the steaks and meals kind of small <J: laugh> and I have to order two just to-- just to fill me up-- like so . . . um . . . that's– it's yeah different, you know so, what type of cars do you want to drive?

218J3: Excuse me?

219A3: Cars, what type of cars do you want to drive? Automobiles.

220J3: Oh my– my car is Toyota.

221A3: Uh-huh.

222J3: It's– it's very compact car.

223A3: Uh-huh, do you- would you like to drive a bigger car or . . . ?

224J3: Well, uh- yeah, I– I hope so. If– if I have money. (laugh)

225A3: I think everyone uh-uh m-my dream, I said that there's an Alfa Romeo down there, fortunately they don't sell those– well they do but-- they cost very much but uh-uh, um, I– I like to have BMW two seater roadster and if I could ever afford it. It's too expensive. <J: laugh> Um . . . I think everybody has those dreams of having nice-- no-- um house, couple of cars, and um, and be able to travel. So– so on vacation do you get to travel– do you travel a lot outside Japan or stay?

226J3: Well, um– recently I– I don't have much time but, yeah, I like– like to . . .

227A3: Where is your favorite places that you like to travel to?

228J3: Well– um in Japan, I like to, um, I like to go to sea, to swim, and um, uh– and, um, go to maybe with– with my daughters– my daughters are small, so, I try together with them.

229A3: Okay, so well, I just I like to travel the world so, hopefully I would get to China, and down to Australia, New Zealand, and--

230J3: Yeah.

231A3: And, uh, I'd like to go to India and, uh, an Africa when problem slows down– um so, I'm still little adventurer at heart I still, there's a lot of places still I like to see (…)

232J3: How man-many countries have you (…)?

233A3: Oh besides I've been to Japan, I've been to almost all– all Europe through Middle East um-uh I guess my favorite country is still Italy.

234J3: Italy? Ummmm–

235A3: Yeah-yeah-yeah so, um– I'm planning go back there in September, uh– for couple of weeks, uh– to visit, um– my favorite place in the United States is still Hawaii and beach and nice weather, uh– so I haven't been to down South America yet so I'm gonna go down there and see that– just see some of the places that I studied– yeah, as a kid when I was growing up, um, ah– I like historical places. So, there's a lot of history out there and– I probably won't– I won't probably get to see it all in my life time but I'll– I'll try, um (……..), um take a stab at it and see if

I can get to these place to travel in I just can't see not seeing the world– you know what's out there.

236J3: Traveling is very, um, very– interesting because, uh-um, we can understand culture, people–

237A3: So you have two daughters, what's their ages?

When A3 asked J3, "What type of cars do you want to drive?" in turn 217, J3 could not catch the question because A3 changed the topic (abruptly to J3). A3 paraphrased his question and J3 answered by saying, "Oh my—my car is Toyota," in turn 220. At this point, J3 understood A3's question but started to talk about his current car, intending to talk about what type of car he wanted to drive later in the future. From J3's viewpoint, starting with his current car functioned as setting the scene for him to continue his narrative. In the Japanese discourse pattern, we often set the scene first, then tell the story, and make a concluding remark. While a speaker sets the scene, tells the story, and concludes the story, the listener does not interrupt and instead shows his/her interest by nodding and giving back-channels. J3 apparently employed this Japanese story-telling discourse pattern. However, A3 does not seem to have understood this discourse pattern, thus not waiting for J3 to finish his story. Instead he started his story about what types of cars he wanted to drive and changed the topic when he finished his story in turn 225.

Discussion

The data analysis revealed several kinds of communication difficulties these Japanese EFL speakers encountered while interacting with the American English native speakers.

Much Longer Talk on the Native English Speakers' Side

Both data show that the American English native speakers tended to, or from their point of view, talk a lot more than the Japanese speakers of English they were conversing with in English. The reason may be because the Japanese speakers tended to listen to the native English speakers throughout the conversation instead of actively participating in the conversation. The Japanese speakers tended to take a listener's role and give only back-channels and short comments.

Japanese speakers, however, were not always satisfied with playing the listener's role. Sometimes they are eager to talk about themselves but they tend to tell the story according to the Japanese discourse pattern by starting to set the scene for the narrative. If American speakers are not familiar with this pattern, they may not wait for the Japanese counterparts to finish their story and instead interrupt the talk and start talking about something different or unrelated to the conversation, resulting in more talk on the native English speakers' side, as found in this study.

Much More Self-Disclosure on the Native English Speakers' Side

The data analysis reveals that the native English speakers tended not only to talk a lot more than the Japanese speakers but also to talk a lot more about themselves from the beginning of the conversation. They talked about their family, their marriage, their past experiences, and their job situations, while the Japanese speakers tended to disclose about themselves much less than their counterparts. The Japanese people seldom talk about their family or express their personal opinions.

From the viewpoint of native English speakers, self-disclosure must be one of the useful strategies in co-constructing conversations. They can show their involvement by talking about themselves. On the other hand, talking about themselves, especially about their private lives, is not expected in Japanese society when people meet for the first time. They prefer to start talking more about impersonal matters and gradually start talking more about personal matters as they build a good relationship.

Frequent Topic Shift on the Native English Speakers' Side

The native English speakers seemed to change topics frequently. In the follow-up interview, they stated that they kept changing topics until they were sure that they had found appropriate topics they could comfortably talk about with the Japanese speakers. Without noticing the native speakers' intent, the Japanese speakers seemed to be busy with responding to new topics and answering them. They sometimes seemed unable to keep up with the conversations.

This frequent topic shift may come from the Native Speaker of Englishes' uneasiness with the Japanese speakers, since the latter did not seem to involve themselves in conversations as much as expected according to American English norms. The Japanese speakers showed their involvement by listening to their American counterparts, by giving backchannels, and by answering questions, which are acceptable ways of showing involvement according to Japanese norms.

Difficulty of Self-Disclosure on the Japanese Speakers' Side

As for self-disclosure, the Japanese speakers seemed to have difficulty in disclosing information about themselves to the same extent as the American speakers did when they talked with people they meet for the first time. This may be because having an intimate conversation with strangers, especially about private matters, is not expected in Japanese culture.

The extent to which one can expect others to disclose about themselves varies from culture to culture. It is very difficult to understand the norms across cultures. Therefore, Japanese speakers may expect American speakers to reveal personal information about themselves to an extent unexpected even according to American norms.

After trying various strategies in hand to co-construct the conversation, A4 and A5 stated in the follow-up interview that they did not enjoy the conversations with J4 and J5. They even confessed that they did not want to talk with them anymore, while J4 and J5 revealed at their follow-up interview that they had enjoyed listening to A4 and A5. They did not notice A4 and A5 did not enjoy the conversation with them. Moreover, they did not realize that they should have participated in the conversation more actively by initiating topics, elaborating on topics, and showing interest and involvement by asking questions and giving feedback. In-depth analysis indicates that the Japanese EFL speakers transferred a Japanese discourse pattern into their English conversations and took a listener's role without actively participating in the conversation.

Previous research such as Barnlund's (1974) has already demonstrated that Japanese people do not disclose about themselves to the same extent as American people do. The in-depth analysis of natural data in this study supports Barnlund's findings at the discourse level. Moreover, the analysis reveals at what point and to what extent Japanese EFL speakers should (or could) have disclosed about themselves. For example, when A5 talked about his marriage, his wife and his wife's sisters' spouses, J4 and J5 should (or could) have talked about their own marriages and their wives. Then, their self-disclosure could have let A4 and A5 ask questions and give comments to them and as a result all the participants could have elaborated on the topic together.

This in-depth analysis also reveals areas where Japanese EFL speakers have difficulty in communicating with native English speakers which leads to the need for more effective teaching materials on pragmatic rules and more effective training to Japanese EFL speakers.

Conclusion

The analyses revealed that the Japanese EFL speakers in my data were not able to carry on a conversation smoothly with the American English native speakers they met for the first time although all the Japanese participants had a good command of English. Their pragmatic failure may be caused by their transfer of Japanese communication styles into English conversations. The North American English speakers in the data elaborated on topics through co-construction by asking and answering questions and making clear topic shifts, while the Japanese speakers tended to give less information and their topic shifts were less clear.

When the Japanese advanced-level EFL speakers interacted with the native English speakers they met for the first time, they seemed to be able to change their linguistic code from Japanese to English. However, changing discourse patterns from Japanese to English seemed to be much more difficult. In English, the Japanese speakers could not depend on *desu/masu* forms as powerful linguistic devices to lengthen/shorten the distance and to show deference or to build solidarity as they do in Japanese (Tsuda, 2009). Instead of the *desu/masu* forms, they are expected to co-construct conversations by showing involvement through active participation in the talk, asking and answering questions, making interactive turn-taking and disclosing information about themselves. However, employing these English discourse patterns does not seem to be easy for most Japanese speakers. Therefore, they tend

to transfer Japanese rapport building strategies. They often assume the passive role of a listener by giving only back-channels to let English speakers talk. They tend to allocate turns to each other to avoid conflicts. They seem to prefer choosing impersonal topics to personal ones. They seem to hesitate to disclose themselves. These discourse patterns may reflect what is expected in Japanese conversations when people meet someone for the first time. Unfortunately, transfer in terms of discourse patterns from Japanese to English could result in communication difficulties as analyzed in this paper. Since this study is based on small conversational data, I cannot make any generalizations about communication difficulties which Japanese EFL speakers may have in interacting with native English speakers. Further research should be conducted by collecting and analyzing more data to investigate further communication difficulties for which different pragmatic rules may be blamed as a hindrance.

Author's Note

This paper is a revised version of my paper titled, "Topic Development and Topic Shift in Japanese and North American English Conversations," which was presented at the panel on "Differences in Conversational Styles between Japanese and North American Speakers: Formal and Informal Styles, Participation Organization and Topic Development" at the 15th International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies (IAICS) Conference held at Kumamoto Gakuen University in Kumamoto, Japan on September 18, 2009. Sanae Tsuda and Yuka Shigemitsu were co-presenters on this panel.

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