

【原著】

The Effect of Instruction on Hedging on Japanese L2 English Learners' Perceived Ability to Express Opinions

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垣根表現の教育が日本人英語学習者の意見を表す能力に与える効果

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Abstract

This study investigates Japanese L2 English learners' perceived ability to express their opinions and oppose the opinions of others. Specifically, the study investigates the effect of an activity that teaches about hedge use on learners' perceptions. The aims of the study are pursued by creating 15-week online discussion forums for pairs of learners to discuss controversial topics with one another. The study measures learners' perceived ability to express and oppose opinions via a six-point questionnaire before starting the discussion forum, before the teaching activity, after the teaching activity, and at the end of the discussion forum. The participants are 80 first-year students who are enrolled at a middle-ranking Japanese university. They are from three classes, consisting of 61 females and 19 males in total. The investigations find that participants perceive an improvement in their ability to express and oppose opinions after receiving instruction on hedge use. The study concludes that EFL instructors may employ activities on hedge use to improve students' confidence in their discussion skills.

Introduction

This article reports on 80 university-level Japanese L2 English learners' perceived ability to express and oppose the opinions of others in one-to-one online discussion forums. Specifically, the study investigates the degree to which learners' perceptions are influenced by participation in one-to-one discussions and an activity that teaches about hedge use. The role of online interactions is of particular interest to researchers of academic writing produced by L2 English learners. Particularly in the last few years, learners who need to frequently exchange feedback on collaborative work have taken advantage of online-based documents and platforms to facilitate their communications. As the widespread availability of smartphones led to online messaging becoming one of the most popular means of communication in the present day, instructors are able to easily incorporate online discussions as easily accessible means for discussing and practicing writing in the classroom. As students practice their writing skills and prepare for

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assignments via online interactions, the presence of contrary opinions gives rise to face-threatening acts that may damage relationships. In attempts to avoid this, students are able to manage their interactions through the use of hedges, which are words and phrases that lessen the directness of statements. The role of these words and phrases in students' perceived confidence to express and oppose opinion is the focus the investigations. As research up to this point has primarily given attention to the use of hedges in unidirectional forms of academic writing, such as reports and essays, and hedge use in spoken discussion, the current investigations shed light on an area which has received much less attention. This article begins with a review of previous research, considering the background of online discussion forums, disagreement, hedges, and the effect of instruction. Next, the article describes the method, including the research question, participants, and procedures. The article proceeds to the results relating to the research question of this study. Finally, the article discusses the results and concludes with a final overview of the study's focus, findings, limitations, and implications.

Literature Review

Online discussion forums

Online discussion forums were employed to promote discussion among students. The following four qualities of online discussion forums were found to promote discussion among students most effectively: inherent qualities of online discussion forums, a minimized instructor's role, non-anonymity, and the reduction of parallelism. One inherent quality of an online discussion forum, the ability for participants to quickly communicate, make them optimal environments for instructors to promote discussion among students. This was observed by Pitta and Fowler (2005, p. 265), who emphasized that "Electronic communication is by its nature almost instantaneous and its speed aids discussion." Other inherent qualities that promote discussion are outlined by Andresen (2009), who noted that online discussion forums may be more effective than the traditional face-to-face discussion because participants are able to contribute at their own pace, cannot be cut-off, and are able to view a record of previous conversations. The benefits of online discussion were found in Warschauer's study (1995), which compared L2 English learners' participation in face-to-face and electronic discussion. The results showed the greatest increase in participation among the least-talkative participants and greater language formality and complexity overall. Feedback from participants also showed more positive attitudes towards electronic discussion, particularly towards their ability to express opinions. Expanding upon these benefits, Mazzolini and Maddison (2003) found that a minimized instructor's role was found to increase rates of participation in an online discussion forum. Hussin (2008) echoed this by stating that the teacher should not rigidly control the online discussion forum. Polat et al. (2013) found that no anonymity in an online discussion forum, where students are able to identify one another, resulted in increased rates of participation. The reduction of parallelism is another quality of online discussion forums. Parallelism is the tendency in spoken conversation for lower level learners to prepare their next turn rather than listening to the speaker, which results in their response being less discussion-like and more one-directional (Abe, 2019; Abe & Roever, 2019; Galaczi, 2008). The time constraints that are present during a real-time interaction such as spoken conversation are

the cause of this phenomenon. These time-constraints are not present in online discussion forums due to their asynchronous nature, which reduces the likelihood of parallelism occurring.

Research also found that online discussion forums are valuable environments for teaching argumentation. McKee (2002) noted that there is a tendency for students in an online discussion forum to take up and express opposing positions from one another. This tendency for argumentation allows students to improve their argumentation skills. Multiple studies (Baker et al., 2013; Smyth, 2011; Ritchie & Black, 2012) confirmed the role of participation in an online discussion forum in improved argumentation skills. Beyond argumentation skills, online discussion forums allow students to learn how to exploit resources such as non-verbal markers. This is due to the constraints of text-based computer-mediated communication (Abe, 2020).

Disagreement

Disagreement was considered in several studies to be viewed negatively by interactants (Angouri & Locher, 2012; Heritage, 1984; Myers, 2004). Infante and Rancer (1996) referred to disagreement as socially undesirable and Stalpers (1995) mentioned that discord, a lack of harmony between interactants which harms social approval, is often equated to disagreement. This finding was furthered by several studies of conversation (Abe & Roever, 2020; Dersley & Wootton, 2001; Kotthoff, 1993), which noted that agreement is preferred over disagreement. Abe and Roever (2020) found that interactants will attempt to solicit and seek agreement before finishing a conversation. However, studies that focused on the role of disagreement in conversation (Bousfield, 2007; Chiu, 2008; Hernández-Flores, 2008), contended that disagreement is necessary in conversation. Kasper (2006) in particular, highlighted the necessity of disagreement by emphasizing the fact that avoiding disagreement completely is not an option. To avoid disagreement completely would either entail avoiding all people that hold a different opinion or always agreeing with everyone, which are not viable options.

Studies that investigated how interactants disagree in conversation (Stalpers, 1995; Takahashi & Beebe, 1993; Edstrom, 2004), found that in contexts where disagreement is necessitated, interactants will mitigate their disagreements. Takahashi and Beebe (1993) and Edstrom (2004) noted in particular that this was the case in Japanese contexts, where speakers aimed to soften the impact of their dissension. These studies confirmed Leech's Maxim of Agreement in his Politeness Principle (1983), which stated that disagreement is mitigated due to a preference for agreement. Researchers who expanded upon Leech's Politeness Principle (Angouri & Locher, 2012; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Spencer-Oatey, 2000) specified that this mitigation is due to the face-threatening quality of disagreement. Spencer-Oatey (2000), in particular, mentioned that the face-threatening acts within disagreement need to be treated appropriately in order to create or maintain relationships. All of this suggested that mitigation as a politeness strategy will occur more often in disagreement rather than agreement.

Hedges

Hedges were defined by several authors (Chen, 2010; Fraser, 2010; Hinkel, 2005) as devices in speech that mitigate directness by decreasing a certain quality of what an interactant says. Lakoff (1973) described this accurately, explaining that hedges are words used to change the

clarity or directness of what a speaker says. Grice's maxims (1975) required speakers to maintain a degree of accuracy in their statements. In order to opt out of these maxims when their knowledge of a conversation's topic is limited, speakers may use hedges, which are words and phrases that reduce the strength of statements. An example of this is when a person says *too much salt may be harmful for your health* as opposed to *too much salt is harmful for your health*. The hedge *may be* in the former replaces *is* in the latter, reducing the strength of the statement. This is done to accurately reflect the speaker's limited knowledge of the topic at hand.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), a hedge is a politeness strategy in an interaction that protects the other person's *face*. Hedges protect the *face* by mitigating face threatening acts. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory built on Goffman's concept of *face* (1955, p. 323), where interactants are constantly doing what Goffman described as "facework: the efforts made by an interactant to maintain their own face, and the face of all other interactants in an interaction". Examples of hedges that mitigate face threatening acts are *in my opinion* or *might* in the response *in my opinion, you might not understand the topic*. Without the hedges, the response would be *you do not understand the topic*, directly questioning the other person's intelligence, with nothing to mitigate the face threatening act. Hedges in these situations reduce the possibility of causing offense and preserve relationships between interactants.

Effect of instruction

Bou-France and Garces-Conejos (2003, p. 19) pointed out that politeness strategies may be taught using Brown and Levinson's model of politeness in order to "help non-native speakers to become aware of potential areas for negative pragmatic transfer and avoid pragmatic failure." Several studies that noticed EFL learners' inability to use politeness strategies in a similar way to native speakers of English (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015; Eelen 2001; Linde, 2009) emphasized the need for the teaching of politeness strategies. Commenting on teaching EFL learners, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015, p. 9) suggested that "These L2 learners need, as a first step, to have their pragmatic awareness raised through consciousness-raising activities, which can help them become aware of the different politeness norms that might prevail in the target language environment."

Several studies that investigated the effect of instruction on EFL learners' use of politeness strategies (LoCastro, 1997; Schepers, 2014; Tan & Farashaiyan, 2012) noted the positive effects of instruction on EFL learners' ability to use politeness strategies and therefore increase their pragmatic competence. Schepers (2014, p. 28) mentioned that "The teaching of pragmatics has proven to be effective in the context of the classroom, especially in an EFL one." This means that L2 English learners benefit the most from lessons that focus on pragmatics, while L1 English speakers may already have general concept of the pragmatics of the language they speak natively. Although the teaching of politeness strategies has been shown to be effective in the EFL classroom, Meier's study (1997) noted that politeness strategies that were taught without regard to context resulted in inappropriate overuses of politeness strategies. Meier (1997, p. 24) pointed out that "Because appropriateness is highly situation-dependent, contextual factors become of utmost importance."

Method

Research questions

Previous research suggested that knowledge of hedge use influences perceptions towards expressing and opposing opinions. The current research was designed to evaluate this in one-to-one online discussion forums via the following inquiry: How does an activity that teaches about hedge use affect learners' perceived ability to express and oppose opinions?

Participants

The participants were 80 second-year students enrolled in a mandatory English conversation course at a middle-ranking Japanese university. They were from three classes and consisted of 61 females and 19 males in total. The participants had an English proficiency A1 to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages scale. All of the participants were taught by the researcher of the study.

Procedures

Informed consent. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the participants' university. After receiving this permission, the study was explained to the students before they were given the option to participate. Students who provided consent were given the option to withdraw their consent at any time, which would discontinue their participation in the discussion forum and eliminate all data collected from them.

Collecting and preparing participants' topics statements. Topics for the discussion forums were gathered from the students in each class. The researcher asked participants to propose their own topic statements for which opinions were likely to be divided, such as "Money is more important than love". The researcher collected these topic statements and posted one topic statement at the end of each class throughout the duration of the discussion forum. This was done to ensure a new topic was being posted each week.

Instruction on hedge use. The activity that was employed to instruct participants on the use of hedges took ten minutes of class time at the beginning of class on the seventh week of the discussion forums. Regarding the activities that taught hedge use, the teachers wrote example topic statements (e.g. "Smoking should be banned on campus.") and incomplete responses (e.g. "_____, teachers should be allowed to smoke.") on the board, and asked students to fill in the blank in order to elicit example of hedges from the participants. Participants were then asked to complete part one of a handout titled "Cushion words: How to give your opinion and still be friends." Once participants finished part one, they were asked to respond to the statements in part two using the language from part one. The handout is shown in Figure 1.

The following week, participants were asked to repeat part two of the handout in order to review what they had learned the previous week.

Conducting the discussion forums. Participants chose a partner and joined their

(Part one) Cushion words: How to give your opinion and still be friends.

In my opinion, teachers should be allowed to smoke.

_____, teachers should be allowed to smoke.

In my opinion,...

I don't know, but...

In general,...

Perhaps,...

As I see it,...

Usually,...

As a rule,...

Smoking is fairly bad for your health.

Smoking is _____ bad for your health.

fairly...

a little...

pretty...

slightly...

a bit...

generally...

not always...

Smoking might cause cancer.

Smoking _____ cause cancer.

might...

may...

could...

may not...

can...

may possibly...

(Part two)

1. Violent movies make people more violent.

2. Cigarette advertising should be banned.

3. It's important to have priority seats on buses and trains for elderly people.

4. Facebook is the best way to keep in touch.

5. There's nothing wrong with using a mobile phone on the bus or train.

6. Television is bad for your mind.

Figure 1. Handout given to participants to practice employing hedges.

respective discussion forums. The discussion forums were based on the Showbie platform, which allowed pairs of participants to send private messages to each other. Each week, the teacher posted a new topic statement onto their discussion forum, announced this new topic statement during class, and reminded participants to check the discussion forum. Additionally, in order to maintain the status of the forum as unsupervised, the teacher did not moderate the content of the participants' contributions to the discussion forum.

Administering the questionnaires. The questionnaire was administered once during each phase of the discussion forum: before creating the discussion forums, before the teaching activity, after the teaching activity, and at the end of the discussion forums. This was performed in order to measure the effect of only participating in discussions, the effect of receiving instruction on

hedge use, the effect of time elapsed after receiving instruction, and the combined effect of participating in discussions for 15 weeks and receiving instruction on hedge use. The questionnaires included two questions: *自分の意見を上手く述べることはできますか？* [*Are you able to express your opinion well?*] and *相手の意見に上手く反対意見を述べることはできますか？* [*Are you able to express an opposing opinion towards your partner well?*]. These were ranked on a six-point scale from 1: *そう思わない* [*I don't think so*] to 6: *そう思う* [*I think so*].

Data analysis. The investigations analyzed a total of 320 questionnaire results from the participants. All participants completed the questionnaire once during each phase throughout the duration of the discussion forums. The mean and standard deviation for each phase were calculated along with the significant differences between each phase.

Results

The following section reports on the findings derived from the questionnaires during the four phases, pre-discussion, pre-instruction, post-instruction, and post-discussion. Table 1 shows participants' perceived ability to express and oppose an opinion. A higher value denotes a greater confidence to express or oppose an opinion.

Table 1. Perceived ability to express and oppose an opinion. Mean values and standard deviations.

	Express an opinion	Oppose an opinion
Pre-discussion	3.125 (1.122)	2.913 (1.098)
Pre-instruction	3.6 (1.056)	3.138 (1.046)
Post-instruction	3.863 (1.181)	3.563 (1.192)
Post-discussion	3.85 (1.05)	3.488 (1.183)

Participants' perceived ability to express and oppose an opinion increased over time before the teaching activity was administered. There was a noticeable increase after the teaching activity, which was relatively maintained at the end of the discussions. The results also show that participants perceive less confidence in their ability to oppose an opinion when compared to generally expressing an opinion. Figure 2 shows a visual representation of this change over time.

A t-test was performed between the phases in order to determine the significant differences. In this study, a p-value of 0.01 was considered as highly significant. Table 2 shows these results.

Based on the p-value for *Pre-discussion vs. Pre-instruction*, participation in the discussions for seven weeks without instruction had a significant influence on participants' perceived ability to express opinions. The p-value for *Pre-instruction vs. Post-instruction* indicated that the teaching activity had a significant influence on their perceived to ability to express and oppose opinions. Based on the *Post-instruction vs. Post-discussion*, participants retained this increased confidence for the remainder of the discussions. The results for *Pre-discussion vs. Post-discussion* show that participation in the study as a whole had a significant impact on participants' perceptions.

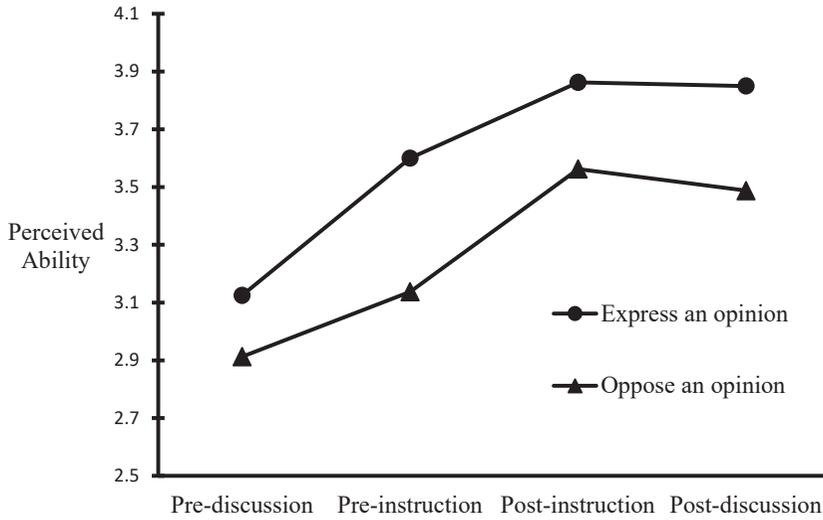


Figure 2. Visual representation of the four phases.

Table 2. Significant differences. P-values from a t-test.

	Express an opinion	Oppose an opinion
Pre-discussion vs. Pre-instruction	1.512e-4	0.063
Pre-instruction vs. Post-instruction	3.984e-3	3.301e-6
Post-instruction vs. Post-discussion	0.924	0.556
Pre-discussion vs. Post-discussion	8.264e-7	2.789e-5

Discussion

The results from this study demonstrated that instruction on hedge use significantly influenced participants' perceived ability to express disagreement towards their partner, which is more difficult than expressing agreement (Abe & Roever, 2020; Dersley & Wootton, 2001; Kotthoff, 1993). It is likely that the instruction on hedge use increased participants' confidence to adequately address face-threatening acts in disagreement, which not only bolstered their perceived ability to express opposing opinions, but opinions in general. It should also be recognized that the data also showed that participating in the discussion forums alone had a significant influence on their perceived ability to express opinions in general. This aligns with research (Baker et al., 2013; Smyth, 2011; Ritchie & Black, 2012) that attributed improved argumentation skills to participation in online discussion forums. However, participating in the discussion forums alone did not significantly influence participants' confidence to express disagreement, which likely required a bolstered knowledge of methods to address face-threatening acts. As a whole, the one-to-one discussions and the teaching activity had a lasting effect on participants' perceived ability to express and oppose opinions.

Conclusion

The aim throughout this study has been to investigate the effect of instruction on hedge use on Japanese L2 English learners' perceived ability to express and oppose opinions in online discussion. The study indicates that while participating in discussion increases confidence to express opinions in general, instruction on hedge use is needed to bolster learners' confidence to express opposing opinions.

At this stage, it is important to recognize that the study was relatively limited by the academic nature of the discussions. Although the discussion forums were designed to be nonobligatory unsupervised discussions outside of the classroom, there was evidence that they were perceived as homework that was part of an English course. The discussions contained many messages that were akin to short paragraphs written in EFL writing courses, despite participants being told that the discussion forums were not homework. With these considerations, the findings regarding the perceived ability to express and oppose opinions towards others may be limited to online discussions that occur in the classroom setting that do not extend to more informal contexts.

Nevertheless, the following implications may be drawn from the findings. L2 English learners who participate in online discussion may exhibit an increased confidence to express opinions towards others. Additionally, instruction on hedge use may be an effective method to increase learners' confidence to express disagreement, which is a particularly difficult task for both L1 and L2 speakers. It may be worth exploring this in environments where learners produce less formal writing, such as those involving conversations between L1 and L2 interactants.

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The Effect of Instruction on Hedging on Japanese L2 English Learners' Perceived Ability to Express Opinions

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