How University EFL Learners Disagree via Flip Videos

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This study introduces how Japanese university EFL learners express disagreement using asynchronous Flip videos and proposes an instructional model for pragmatic competence. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review of disagreement strategies among native and non-native English speakers, the study identifies gaps in existing research, particularly regarding the pragmatic challenges faced by Japanese learners. Sixteen participants created videos expressing disagreement on selected discussion topics, which were analyzed using frameworks adapted from Rees-Miller (2000) and Scott (2002). Results reveal a preference for softened disagreements employing negative politeness strategies and a limited range of linguistic features, such as repetitive use of downtoners and modals. To address these challenges, the *awareness-observe-analysis-application* model is proposed, emphasizing cultural sensitivity and practical application.

本研究は、日本の大学生EFL学習者が非同期型Flipビデオを用いてどのように不同意を表現するかを調査し、語用論的能力を育成するための指導モデルを提案するものである。英語母語話者および非母語話者の不同意表現に関する包括的な先行研究を基に、本研究は特に日本人学習者が直面する語用論的課題に焦点をあわせ、既存の研究のギャップを特定した。16名の参加者が選択されたディスカッションテーマについて不同意を表現するビデオを作成し、Rees-Miller (2000) および Scott (2002) の枠組みを基に分析された。結果として、学習者はネガティブ・ポライトネス戦略を用いた緩和された不同意タイプを好む傾向があり、ダウントナーや法助動詞の反復的使用など、限られた範囲の言語的特徴が明らかになった。これらの課題に対応するために、文化的感受性と実践的応用を重視したawareness-observe-analysis-application（意識ー観察ー分析ー応用）モデルを提案する。

Alongside the rise of globalization, English communication opportunities in Japan have rapidly expanded, particularly in educational and professional settings. To prepare Japanese citizens for these interactions, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has prioritized communicative competence as a core objective of foreign language education since 1998 (Oshima, 2020), reflected in the statement "accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information, ideas" (MEXT, 2008a, p.1), which underscores the importance of pragmatic application. However, while the curriculum specifies functions such as expressing disagreement and expressing opinions, it provides little guidance on pragmatic instruction, leaving significant gaps in fostering appropriateness (MEXT, 2008b, p.91). Analyses of government-approved high school textbooks further highlight this gap, showing an overemphasis on mechanical practice and a lack of pragmatic demonstration (McGroarty & Taguchi, 2005; Glasgow & Paller, 2014). The latest version of the Course of Study continues to stress the need for students to develop communicative ability by means of adding sample dialogues for expressing opinions and disagreement (MEXT, 2017, p.1).

Difficulties with Disagreements

At the university level, teachers endeavor to foster students' ability to articulate opinions, yet Japanese learners often hesitate to express disagreement, a phenomenon observed by the authors (Hao & Huntley, 2024) and corroborated by cross-cultural research on Japan's emphasis on group harmony (Meyer, 2016). This reluctance poses challenges in international contexts where assertiveness is often valued. Social media habits further exacerbate this issue among university students, who become accustomed to simplified, non-confrontational interactions. To address these challenges, understanding disagreement strategies and linguistic features is crucial.

Existing studies on disagreement strategies largely focus on native English speakers, identifying linguistic tools and politeness strategies used in academic and business settings (Rees-Miller, 2000; Williams, 1988). Scott (2002) analyzed debates on the

television show *Crossfire*, identifying 12 linguistic features such as absolutes, negation, and floor bids in the expression of disagreement. The dominance of native speaker models in the literature can lead to a narrow view of pragmatic competence. This study aims to offer the proficient L2 speaker model as another choice for learners. Comparative research by Beebe and Takahashi (1989) showed American L1 speakers and Japanese learners of English alternated between positive remarks and criticisms, though Americans used explicit disagreement while Japanese learners relied on repeated questioning. More recent English as a lingua franca (ELF)-based studies offer insight into non-native speaker strategies. Alzahrani (2020) found that ELF business professionals, mainly from Indo-European language backgrounds, favored mitigated over direct disagreement. Similarly, Liu et al. (2022) observed ELF university students from 11 L1 backgrounds employing hedging and nonverbal cues during disagreement, viewing it as a chance to exchange opinions. While informative, these studies still require adaptation to address the cultural and pragmatic challenges specific to Japanese learners, especially in building skills for global communication.

This collaborative study helps to bridge this gap by analyzing how Japanese university students express disagreement through asynchronous Flip videos, a medium that grew in popularity in Japanese EFL classes during the Covid-19 pandemic (Hammett, 2021). By examining linguistic strategies and pragmatic proficiency in the student videos, this research offers insights into learners' current challenges and provides pedagogical implications for explicit instruction in EFL classrooms.

Methodology

Research Questions

To explore how Japanese EFL learners engage in discussion and express disagreement in English, this study addresses three key research questions.

RQ 1. What are popular discussion topics among Japanese EFL learners?

RQ 2. What are the disagreement types that Japanese students are likely to use?

RQ 3. What linguistic features do students use when expressing disagreement?

Participant Selection

Two specific Japanese student populations were compared in this research to procure a variety of speaking styles. Students in University A were members of an English program at an urban institution, while students in University B were studying International Relations at a rural university. Students ranged from first year to fourth year and were recruited via a combination of volunteering, extra credit, and small-scale monetary consolation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants at each stage of the research process, and the study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines from both universities for research involving human subjects as applicable at the time. Sixty-five students participated in the topic selection survey in the first stage of research and 16 students participated in the second phase by creating opinion and disagreement videos on Flip.

Discussion Topic Selection

In order to acquire authentic English disagreements from university students, the research design was broken into three stages, beginning with the choice of engaging discussion topics at an appropriate level. As the creation of disagreements was expected to be culturally and socially difficult, the relevancy of discussion topics for the participants was a high priority. It was therefore determined that providing a limited number of topics would be useful for interaction and comparison.

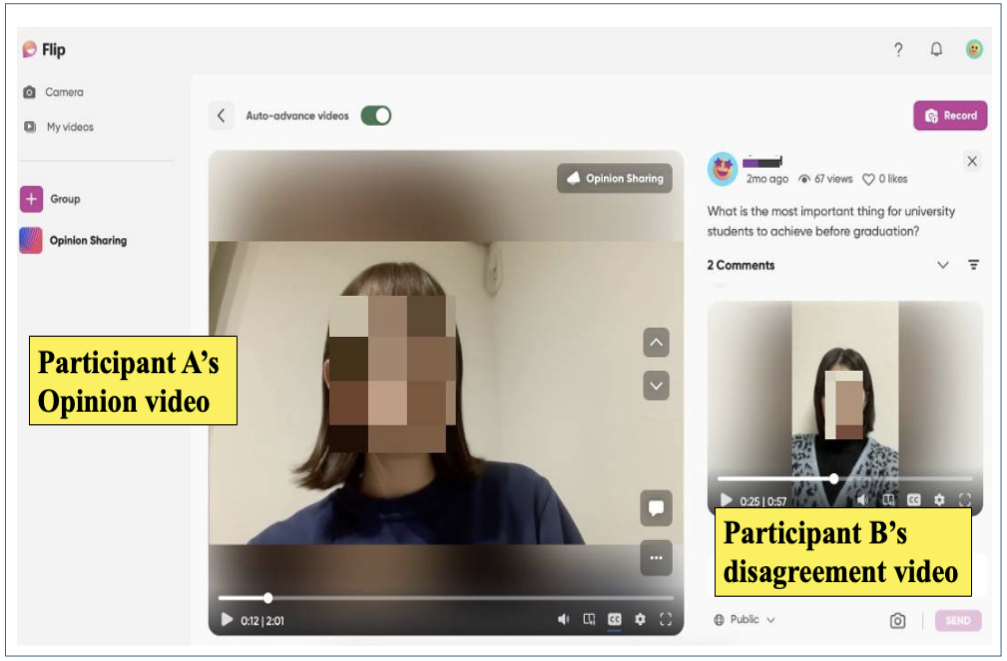
To address RQ1, the first stage of this research involved distributing a survey to students via Google Forms to identify three preferred discussion topics from 10 options (see Appendix for full survey). The top three choices were then used for video creation in the next phase of research.

Opinion and Disagreement Videos

Due to the long-distance nature of two university populations, the free Microsoft software and website Flip (previously branded as Flipgrid) was used to gather asynchronous videos from the students. Flip gained popularity as an EFL/ESL classroom tool during the Covid-19 pandemic for its asynchronous nature and accessible interface for both user and administrator roles (Esparrago-Kalidas, et al., 2022; Zghoul & Bataineh, 2024). Auto-generated transcripts and secure user data also made Flip a desirable tool for this research. On the website, students chose one of three discussion topics (selected from the results of the previous survey) and created a video expressing their thoughts on the topic, thereby creating a library of opinions for other students to disagree with. Students were required to show their face in the video with no visual obstructions of the mouth to assist with transcription (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Screenshot of Flip Layout With Opinion and Disagreement Videos



Once opinion videos had been created, students then chose another student's opinion video and replied with a second video wherein they disagreed with the originally posted opinion, resulting in a total of two videos created per student. Students were not given guidance on how to create an opposing opinion, as capturing authentic English utterances was the objective. All student-created videos were viewable by students and researchers during the data collection process, however, privacy and confidentiality were maintained by restricting the ability to download videos, providing instructions on confidentiality measures when creating screen names, and removing student permission to view videos past the data collection window.

Videos were transcribed and analyzed to address research questions 2 and 3. Transcription texts were categorized into one of Rees-Miller (2000)'s disagreement types: (1) softened disagreement, (2) not softened or strengthened, or (3) aggravated disagreement. *Softened disagreements* consist of positive politeness (inclusive 1st person [*we should...*] or partial agreements) that engages with the opposing opinion and negative politeness (downtoners [*maybe, sort of*] or *I think* phrases) that weakens the speech of the disagreement. Statements of opinion that contradict and do not engage or acknowledge the act of disagreeing are considered neither softened nor strengthened, and a disagreement that uses intensifiers (*very, always*) or the indexical *you* (sometimes called the personal *you* or accusatory *you*) are considered aggravated disagreements.

Linguistic markers identified by Scott (2002) were used to analyze (1) absolutes, (2) negation, (3) emphatics, (4) pronouns (focusing on indexical *you*), and (5) modals. As Scott studied oral disagreements in native English speakers, the framework was modified into one that applied more realistically to L2 learners in an asynchronous video context (see Table 1). For example, Scott's framework included pausing and phrasal repetition as rhetoric markers, but, in contrast, such features were ascribed as false starts or mental preparation in our data.

Table 1

Revised Linguistic Features for L2 Application

Absolutes	Negation		Emphatics	Indexical you	Modals
	affixial	non-affixial			
all	anti-	no	a lot	you	can
anybody	de-	not	at all	your	could
ever	dis-	~n't	just	yourself	may
every	-less		more	yourselves	might
everyone	mis-		most		must
never	non-		real + adjective		will
nobody	un-		so + adverb		would
none	etc.		etc.		going to
nothing					have to
etc.					etc.

The text analysis involved a two-step process to ensure the reliability of identifying linguistic markers and disagreement types. The researchers then independently analyzed

the transcriptions, segmenting them into pragmatic phrases. They identified linguistic features using the modified Scott framework, as well as assigning one of the four Rees-Miller disagreement types. Following their independent analyses, the researchers then compared findings and discrepancies to reach a consensus on final categorization. This collaborative approach ensured accuracy and consistency in the identification of linguistic patterns.

Final data was codified and was then analyzed descriptively between topic selection, university, gender, disagreement type, and linguistic features. A Pearson's correlation was also conducted to identify any possible relationships between variables.

Results

Discussion Topic Selection

The preliminary survey was distributed to 65 students (32 from University A and 33 from University B), with each choosing three out of ten topics discussing social issues. Of the potential topics, participants gravitated towards subjects regarding college education (27.98%), online vs. face-to-face learning styles [13.47%], the most important thing before graduation [14.51%], as well as strongly preferring the two topics that included Japanese words (32.64%)—*kawaii* [19.69%] and グローバル人材 (global talents) [12.95%]. These four topics together comprised 60.62% of student choice, indicating a preference for topics that could be answered from personal experience as a university student or as a Japanese speaker (see Figure 2).

The six least desirable topics received less than 40% of student interest and consisted of larger social themes that were not centered on university experience. Students may have anticipated a higher level of difficulty in these topics as they require prior knowledge and possibly additional research to develop an opinion statement.

The top three topics chosen for the second research phase using Flip asynchronous video were: (1) Is the Japanese concept of *kawaii* the same as the English concept of *cute*?, (2) What is the best learning style for university students? Online or face-to-face?, and (3) What is the most important thing for university students to achieve before graduation?

Overall, on Flip, 15 of the 16 participants created one opinion video and one disagreement video addressing a fellow participant's opinion video. One participant did not submit an opinion video, resulting in 15 opinion videos and 16 disagreement videos. Of the three topics chosen for discussion, there was a clear topic preference when creating videos for the learning styles, with eight participants (47.06%) establishing opinions and 11 (68.75%) disagreements submitted for a majority engagement rate of 57.57% (see Figure 3). The remaining topics of graduation and *kawaii* both had 21.21% of the remaining engagement (graduation—three disagreements and four opinions), with *kawaii* having the overall lowest rate of disagreement discussion at two disagreements and five opinions (12.12% of disagreement engagement) (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

Bar Chart of Topic Survey Results

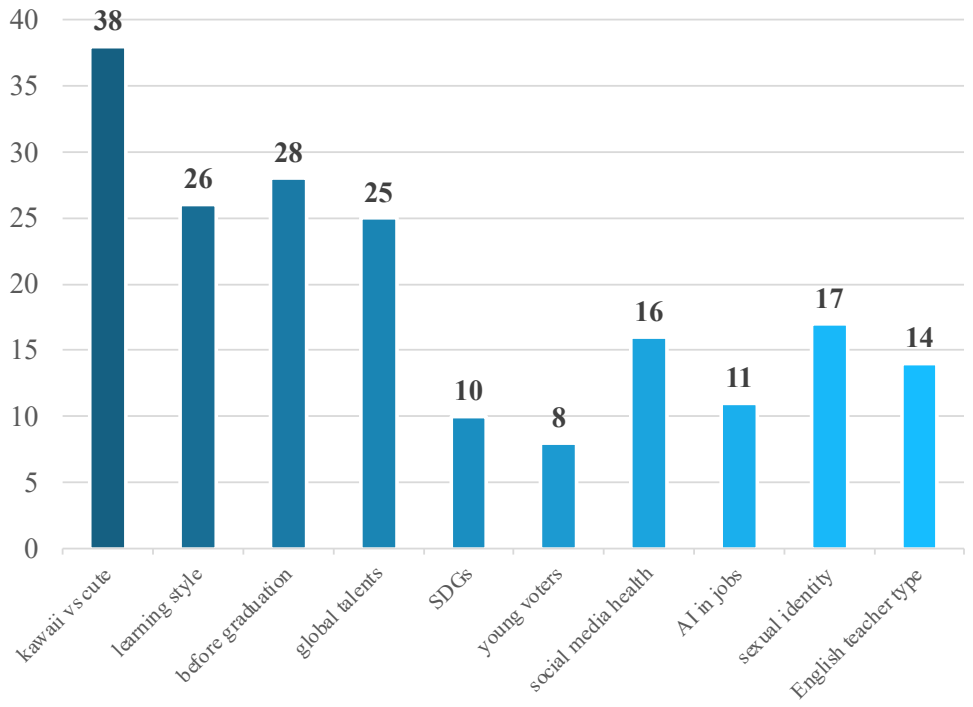
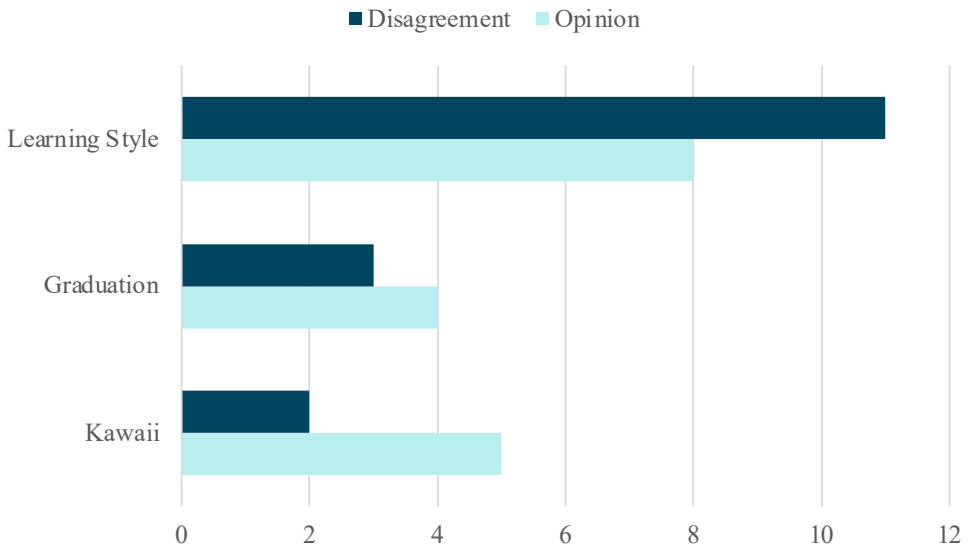


Figure 3

Bar Chart of Opinion and Disagreement Videos Compared by Topic



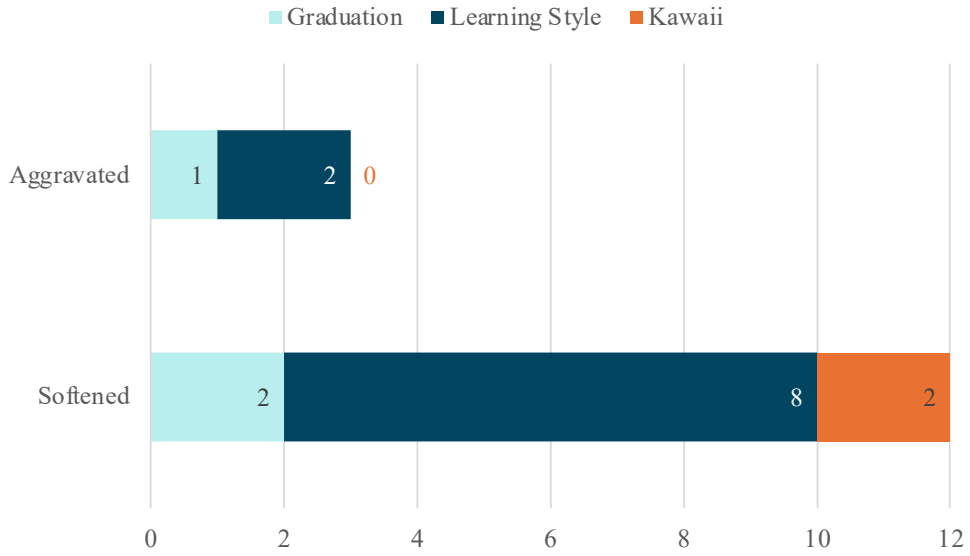
In summary, survey results showed that students preferred a culturally relevant topic (*kawaii*). However, their actual participation behavior suggested a stronger inclination toward personally relatable and experience-based topics (learning styles and graduation goals). Among the selected topics for video tasks, learning styles generated the highest engagement, particularly in terms of disagreement. This contrast between topic preference and active discussion highlights a possible gap between interest and willingness to express opinions, especially on more abstract or culturally nuanced themes.

Types of Disagreement

A majority of disagreement videos (12 videos, 81.25%) were categorized as softened disagreements compared to a minority of aggravated disagreements (three videos, 18.75%). Of these softened disagreements, 10 were identified as using negative politeness (76.92%), two used positive politeness (15.38%), and one was coded as general softened agreement with no specific subtype (7.69%). In contrast, only three were classified as aggravated (See Figure 4). From this, we can see a clear preference for softened disagreement styles using negative politeness in participant submissions.

Figure 4

Bar Chart of Disagreement Videos by Topic and Disagreement Type



In addition to coding types of disagreement in participant videos overall, specific linguistic markers and features were also identified. The most frequent linguistic markers used to categorize disagreement statements were intensifiers (23.58%) (a combination of emphatics [19.81%] and absolutes [3.77%]), followed by verbs of uncertainty (18.40%), hedging statements (17.45%), and inclusive 1st person (15.09%). Markers that appeared with less than 10% frequency, in order from most prevalent to least, were downtoners (8.49%), statements of partial agreement (7.08%), use of personal *you* (4.25%), contradictory statements (3.30%), positive comments (1.52%), and questions (0.47%) (see Table 2).

Table 2

Rate of Usage for Linguistic Markers in Disagreement Statements

Disagreement type	Linguistic markers		Videos	Frequency	% of Total
softened	verbs of uncertainty		11	39	18.40%
	hedging statements		14	37	17.45%
	inclusive 1st person		7	32	15.09%
	downtoners		11	18	8.49%
	partial agreement		12	15	7.08%
	positive comments		3	4	1.52%
neither softened nor strengthened	contradictory statement		7	7	3.30%
	questions		1	1	0.47%
aggravated	personal *you*		6	9	4.25%
	intensifiers	absolutes	7	8	3.77%
		emphatics	13	42	19.81%

In summary, the majority of disagreement videos were categorized as softened, with most of those using negative politeness strategies. Linguistic analysis showed that intensifiers were the most frequently used marker overall, especially in aggravated disagreements. In contrast, softened disagreement statements more commonly included verbs of uncertainty, hedging, and inclusive first-person expressions, and each appeared with lower overall frequency than intensifiers.

Linguistic features

Of the linguistic features identified in the statements of disagreements, nearly a third were modals (64 occurrences, 31.07%) appearing in 14 videos followed by emphatics (42 occurrences in 14 videos, 20.39%), and linguistic features of negation (37 occurrences in 12 videos, 17.96%) (a combination of affixial [7.28%] and non-affixial [10.68%]). Indexical 2nd person pronouns and absolutes were the least frequently occurring features at 17 (8.25%) and nine (4.37%) occurrences accordingly (see Table 3).

Table 3

Rate and Frequency of Linguistic Feature Usage

Linguistic features	Videos	Frequency	% of total
absolutes	7	9	4.37
negation – affixial	8	15	7.28
negation – non-affixial	12	22	10.68
emphatics	14	42	20.39
indexical you	9	17	8.25
modals	14	64	31.07

In summary, students used emphatics and intensifiers to strengthen statements of disagreement, and verbs of uncertainty, hedging statements and inclusive 1st person pronouns to soften statements. While there was an overall prevalence of softened disagreement, nearly all statements included aggravated linguistic markers.

Comparative Analysis

A *t-test* analysis between students from the two universities was conducted to identify differences in disagreement styles and linguistic features. Students from University A used statistically significantly more linguistic features ($t = -2.178$, two-tailed $p = 0.047$, $\Delta = 6.5$), specifically more modals ($t = -3.661$, two-tailed $p = .003$, $\Delta = 4.133$) than students at University B.

After correlating all variables in the study, six correlations were found to be statistically significant (see Table 4). The relationships between university affiliation (A = 2, B = 1), linguistic feature usage ($r = .503$, $p = .047$), and modal usage ($r = .699$, $p = .003$) aligns with the findings from the *t-tests*: that students from University A were more likely to incorporate linguistic features and modals in their disagreements.

Additionally, moderate correlations were observed between the usage rates of linguistic features, emphatics, and modals. Specifically, students who used a higher number of linguistic features tended to employ both emphatics ($r = .692$, $p = .003$) and modals ($r = .525$, $p = .037$) more frequently. The final two correlations addressed the relationships between coded disagreement types and the use of affixial negations (e.g., *no* or *not*) ($r = .757$, $p = .001$) and emphatics (e.g., *very* or *more*) ($r = .580$, $p = .024$). As

disagreement types became more aggravated, the frequency of these two linguistic features also increased to a statistically significant degree (see Table 4).

Table 4

Correlation of University, Linguistic Feature Usage Rate and Disagreement Types

	Ling Fea	Dis Type	Absol	Neg AF	Neg NAF	Emph	Mod
University	.503*	.234	.069	.263	-.028	.314	.699**
Ling Feat	-	.130	.297	.218	-.430	.692**	.525*
Disagreement Type		-	.363	.757**	-.330	.580*	.245
Absolutes			-	.324	-.314	.078	.442
Negation (affixial)				-	-.327	.483	.309
Negation (non-affixial)					-	-.392	-.178
Emphatics						-	.171

Note: * significant at the .05 level, ** significant at the .01 level)

In summary, the increase in usage of linguistic features was associated with the increase in aggressiveness of the disagreement type. Students from University A used a higher number of linguistic features overall and showed higher usage rates of emphatics and modals.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The results of this study revealed several key findings regarding student perception of engaging topics, disagreement types, and linguistic features. In response to RQ1, the survey showed that participants report preferring topics related to college education and cultural issues over abstract social issues such as SDG programs. The video creation phase further confirmed this preference, while suggesting a gap between interest in cultural topics and willingness to discuss them in depth.

Regarding RQ2, which focuses on the types of disagreement students are likely to use, the study found that a majority of disagreements were categorized as softened disagreements, where students employed negative politeness strategies to mitigate face threats. Aggravated disagreements were less frequent, indicating a preference for maintaining social harmony.

To address RQ3, the study identified several key linguistic features used by students when expressing opinions and disagreements, including intensifiers, modals, and emphatics. Notably, students from University A employed more linguistic markers, particularly modals, compared to their counterparts at University B, suggesting institutional differences in how disagreement is expressed. Correlational analysis further supported these findings, indicating statistically significant relationships between university affiliation and the use of linguistic features and modals, in addition to identifying the increased use of affixial negations and emphatics as disagreement types became more aggravated.

Pedagogical Implications

The results suggest participants show (1) a lack of pragmatic knowledge about pronouns in terms of politeness and (2) a monotonous use of downtoners, verbs of uncertainty, hedges, and affixal negation. Among the limited number of research-based, application-focused materials, there appears to be a lack of a systematic guide to the pragmatic needs of Japanese learners. To address this gap, this paper details a teaching methodology tailored to Japanese EFL learners: *the awareness-observe-analysis-application model*. This model merges Lacorte's (2021) awareness-analysis-application model with Cohen and Ishihara's (2012) observe-analysis-extend model to emphasize cultural sensitivity and practical application. This model emphasizes pragmatic flexibility for various contexts and prioritizes communicative effectiveness over native-like accuracy.

Considering confrontation-avoidant tendencies, the model encourages learners to maintain cultural identity while equipping them with tools to express opposing opinions. This guide provides practical suggestions for EFL educators seeking to address pragmatic challenges in their conflict-avoidant classrooms. It offers a structured yet flexible framework that can be adapted to university-level English courses, teacher training programs, or other specialized EFL contexts.

At the *awareness* stage, learners reflect on global attitudes toward open disagreement and compare them to their own by means of the disagreement scale found in Meyer (2016). Teachers might facilitate discussions about varying norms and expectations surrounding disagreement in different cultures.

The *observer* stage introduces students to disagreement types and their associated linguistic markers. Teachers then guide students in analyzing pragmatic features through authentic materials such as the 2020 Netflix film *Emily in Paris*. Students identify disagreement strategies and categorize linguistic markers, which fosters both stylistic self-awareness and the ability to recognize interlocutors' communication styles. Teachers may also highlight the importance of recognizing aggravated disagreement, especially for students who plan to study or work abroad, as this awareness helps them better understand and respond to more direct forms of communication. It also introduces students to three types of disagreement and their associated linguistic markers, using models based on proficient L2 speakers rather than native speaker norms. Teachers guide students in analyzing pragmatic features through authentic ELF interactions, helping them recognize how disagreement is negotiated across diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

During the *analysis* phase, learners work with short dialogues to recognize linguistic markers. For instance, they might underline phrases demonstrating politeness strategies (e.g., inclusive pronouns or softened verbs) and discuss their effects on a meta-linguistic level.

Finally, the *application* stage offers controlled practice through gap-filling or matching exercises, gradually progressing to role-plays that simulate real-life disagreements. These role-plays are designed to help students apply varied strategies and adapt to different interlocutors.

Overall, in terms of assessing pragmatic competence, it is possible to observe and evaluate learners' use of linguistic markers. However, assessing their ability to adapt to interlocutors' styles or achieve communicative goals effectively is more challenging. To address this, the guidebook, which is still under development by the authors, aims to include ready-to-use assessment tools alongside its instructional resources. These tools will be designed to measure learners' pragmatic competence not only in controlled classroom settings but also in real-world contexts.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the lack of pre- and follow-up surveys to assess students' attitudes toward Flip and expressing disagreement. While the results of the study itself suggest a correlation between the use of Flip and learners' willingness to express disagreement, it does not establish a direct relationship, as other variables, such as classroom dynamics or individual differences, may be confounding factors. Future research should incorporate pre- and follow-up surveys to better capture learners' perceptions and long-term impacts. Another limitation is the exclusion of non-verbal cues critical to pragmatic competence. Without accounting for these cues, the study may miss important subtleties in how learners convey disagreement. Future studies could address this by integrating tools to analyze non-verbal behavior. Finally, the relatively small and homogenous sample of Japanese EFL learners may not represent the diversity of learner experiences across regions, age groups, or proficiency levels. Broader participation in future studies could offer more nuanced insights and better address varied learner needs.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of pragmatic competence in expressing disagreement and proposes a technology-enhanced instructional model specifically designed for Japanese EFL learners. This model incorporates asynchronous videos as a tool to help learners build their pragmatic competence in a safe, low-pressure environment. By integrating elements from established frameworks, such as politeness theory and pragmatic instruction methodologies, the research contributes to the development of practical teaching strategies that address both linguistic and cultural considerations. The findings highlight Japanese learners' reliance on repetitive linguistic markers and their limited flexibility in pragmatic use, emphasizing the need for structured instruction that promotes adaptability and cultural sensitivity in communication. While a comprehensive L2 speaker model has yet to be fully developed, this study contributes to the ongoing discussion by providing evidence of how Japanese learners navigate disagreement in English.

This study's implications extend beyond the classroom, offering insights into how language learners can maintain their cultural identity while engaging effectively in global settings. The teaching methodology presented here not only equips learners with the tools to voice disagreement confidently but also fosters adaptability to diverse communicative contexts. By integrating asynchronous videos into pragmatic instruction, teachers can provide learners with a safe, reflective space to develop their disagreement strategies. It is hoped that findings will inspire educators to adopt technology-enhanced approaches to better address the pragmatic needs of their students, particularly in culturally sensitive contexts.

Future directions for this research include refining the guidebook through incorporating assessment tools and including a broader and more diverse group of

participants to meet the needs of a wide range of learners. It is hoped that these efforts will inspire further research and provide educators with practical resources to enhance pragmatic instruction, ultimately empowering students to navigate complex interactions in English with greater confidence and competence.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Topic Survey Options

1. Are the SDGs useful for inspiring global changes or are they shallow propaganda?
2. Only ~30% of young voters (under 20 years old) voted in Japan in 2022. Is this a sign of growing passivity in next generations, or has it always been a problem?
3. Are social media websites and apps socially healthy or unhealthy?
4. Do you think travel agents could be replaced with AI technology?
5. How do people identify or learn their own sexuality?
6. Is the Japanese concept of "kawaii" the same as the English concept of "cute"?
7. If you want to enhance your English proficiency, what type of teacher would you choose and why?
8. What is the best learning style for university students? Online or face-to-face?
9. What is the most important thing for university students to achieve before graduation?
10. What are global talents (グローバル人材) to you?