

Japanese EFL Learners' Perception of Politeness in Low Imposition Requests

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This study examined Japanese and American perceptual differences of politeness in English requests in order to find points that can be implemented in EFL classrooms in Japan. For this purpose, 77 Japanese and 48 American university students were given 11 English sentences which were to be used in the action of borrowing a pen, with a seven-point rating scale attached. Findings were as follows: Japanese rated "May I borrow a pen?" to be almost in the neutral politeness zone whereas Americans rated it as a very polite request; in the case of a close-friend as an addressee, Japanese tended to think that "Could you/ I . . . ?" form was less than marginal while Americans saw the form as an appropriate request; and Japanese tended to think other Japanese could use rather casual requests of American students whereas Americans would expect them to use more polite expressions.

本研究は、英語依頼表現の丁寧度について、日本人とアメリカ人の認識の相違を分析したものである。丁寧度に認識に相違があるとすれば、授業で取り上げることにより、日本人英語学習者の社会言語能力の向上に寄与することが期待される。日本人大学生77名、アメリカ人大学生48名を被験者とし、ペンを借りる際の英語依頼表現として11の異なる英文を与え、その丁寧度・適当度を7段階に評価させた結果、以下の事が判明した。日本人は"May I borrow a pen?"が自然な丁寧表現と感じる一方、アメリカ人は親しい間柄での使用には非常に丁寧な表現と感じる。日本人は"Could you/I ...?"表現が丁寧さを欠いた表現と感じる一方、アメリカ人は適度な丁寧表現であると感じる。日本人はアメリカ人に対して比較的くだけた表現を使用できると考えるが、アメリカ人は日本人がより丁寧な表現を使うことを期待している。

In recent years, the importance of teaching pragmatic aspects has been widely acknowledged by ESL/EFL teachers, and, for the purpose of identifying points to be applied in actual language classrooms, a number of rigorous studies have been conducted. Many such pragmatic studies centered around finding problematic areas for learners, and analyzing students' interlanguage by comparing and contrasting it with authentic data collected from native speakers. Research areas that have

most attracted teachers are those of linguistic politeness within the framework of speech acts. Classroom teachers often observe that their students, not knowing an appropriate expression for a certain situation, easily violate the social norms of native speakers, and as a consequence they sound arrogant or impolite. Tanaka (1988), for example, reported that in a book-borrowing situation, Australians were likely to use more modals as mitigating devices as in "Someone said that you might have that book," whereas Japanese ESL students in Australia tended to say "My friend said you have the book," which could sound as if they were saying, "I have proved that you have the book so lend it to me" (p. 89). As Trosborg (1995) stated, a request is an act in which the speaker imposes on the hearer in order to bring about a desired action. It is generally at the cost of the requestee, and therefore, if inadequately performed by the requester the friendly atmosphere between interlocutors can easily break down.

Assuming that there are some differences in the degree of perceived politeness between native speakers and nonnative speakers, this study aims to explore how the Japanese perception of politeness in making English requests could differ from that of Americans. Specifically, this study is intended to examine the perceptual differences of American and Japanese university students toward 1) the level of politeness given English requests, 2) the level of appropriateness for the use of these requests with people of different social and psychological distances, and 3) the level of acceptability of those English requests if used by someone who is not a native speaker of English. By analyzing data obtained from American and Japanese students, it is hoped that some specific points can be found which could be exploited in actual EFL classrooms in Japan.

Politeness and L2 Requests

In second language acquisition research, politeness usually means pragmalinguistically appropriate language usage. Politeness is defined by Lakoff (1990) as "a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange" (p. 34). Generally, it is a concept which is commonly seen across cultures and languages. Brown and Levinson (1987), for example, investigated universal politeness strategies observed in three languages: English, Tamil, and Tzeltal, bringing the notion of "face" into their theory of politeness. According to Brown and Levinson, when we interact socially, certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten the face, or the public self-image, of ourselves or other people. These acts are referred to as "face-threatening acts" (1987, p. 25).

Politeness is often investigated within the framework of such speech acts as requests (Fukushima & Iwata, 1987; Fukushima, 1995; Kitao, 1990; Niki & Tajika, 1994; Tajika & Niki, 1991; Takahashi, 1996; Tanaka & Kawade, 1982; Tanaka, 1988; Trosborg, 1995), complaints (Boxer, 1993; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Trosborg, 1995), refusals (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990) and apologies (Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Garcia, 1989; Trosborg, 1987; Trosborg, 1995). These are acts which could intrinsically threaten the face of a hearer especially when inappropriately used by a speaker.

Among these speech act categories, requesting may be the act in which native/non-native differences in politeness strategies have been the most extensively examined by Japanese researchers. Tanaka and Kawade (1982), examining request strategies of advanced ESL learners in comparison to those of native speakers, claimed two types of distance existed between addressers and addressees: social distance and psychological distance. Social distance was defined as a function of such variables as age, sex, and social status. Psychological distance was related to how one perceives another in relation to oneself. The authors suggested that psychological distance might play a more important role in selecting a politeness strategy than social distance, because the latter would affect the former. They concluded that the non-native speakers, like the native speakers, were able to use different politeness strategies in accordance with varying situations, but with one difference. In certain situations, the non-native speakers tended to employ strategies which were less polite, whereas those the native speakers used were more polite.

Kitao (1990) examined three groups of subjects, Americans, Japanese studying in the U.S., and Japanese living in Japan, finding that "The higher the hearer's power in relation to the speaker, the higher the level of politeness used," and "The Japanese perceive negative politeness [as] less polite than Americans" (p. 190). On the other hand, his findings failed to support the hypothesis that "The Japanese use less polite strategies than Americans do" (p. 190).

Tajika and Niki (1991) illustrated the differences in norms of English and Japanese sentence forms in borrowing situations. In Japanese the sentence form *kashite*- (Can/Could you lend . . . ?) is preferred to the *karite*- (Can/Could I borrow . . . ?). This preference is clearly reflected in English sentences made by Japanese students—i.e., Japanese students used the "Can/Could you lend . . . ?" pattern of requests more often than the "Can/Could I borrow . . . ?" pattern.

Fukushima (1995) compared patterns of requests used by native English speakers in the U.K. and Japanese EFL learners with intermediate

English proficiency. She found that in a situation of low imposition, the British often used speaker-dominant expressions (e.g., *Could I borrow your salt, please?*), while in a situation of high imposition they did not use this pattern of expression but rather used hearer-dominant ones (e.g., *Would you mind putting one of my friends up for the night?*). EFL learners in her study, on the other hand, did not switch patterns depending on degrees of imposition because of the lack of pragmatic knowledge and limited English proficiency.

Takahashi (1993, 1996) examined the transferability of Japanese indirect request strategies to corresponding English request contexts. She defined pragmatic transferability as "the transferability rate obtained by subtracting the acceptability rate of an English indirect request from the acceptability rate of its Japanese equivalent in a particular situation" (Takahashi, 1993, p. 63). She found that contextual factors played a major role in determining transferability at the pragmatic level, and that proficiency had some effect on the transferability of indirect request strategies (Takahashi, 1993).

Politeness is seen as a neutral label for a scale ranging from 'polite (plus-politeness)' to 'impolite (minus-politeness)' with the neutral 'non-polite (zero-politeness)' in the middle (Ide, Ogino, Kawasaki & Ikuta, 1986; Ide, Hill, Carnes, Ogino & Kawasaki, 1992). Both studies used the scale to examine the degree of politeness, which may vary from person to person and from situation to situation. Ide et al. (1986) examined requesting strategies used by Japanese and American college students in their native languages. The results confirmed their assumption that a Japanese, according to the addressee's social status, is likely to use a limited number of expressions of an appropriate politeness level, whereas an American uses a variety of expressions depending on the addressee's perceived distance from the speaker. Furthermore, they illustrated politeness degrees of various types of requests in both languages.

The present study also examines request forms of low imposition, i.e., expressions for asking for a pen. As stated earlier, this study compares perceptual differences between Japanese and Americans toward given English requests. As in Ide et al. (1986), this study also examines the politeness levels of requests. The scope of the study, however, is different. This study aims to compare and contrast Japanese EFL learners' interlanguage perceptions to some specific linguistic forms with those of native speakers vis-à-vis the same forms, whereas Ide et al. examined how Japanese and American L1 requests were different both sociolinguistically and psychologically.

The research questions addressed in this study are:

1. In which of the given requests do Japanese EFL students perceive a different degree of politeness from Americans? And where does this possibly come from?
2. For which of the given requests do Japanese perceive a different degree of appropriateness from Americans when those requests are addressed to those at varying social distances?
3. In which of the given requests do Japanese perceive a different degree of acceptability when those requests are used by Japanese students and not by Americans?

The Study: *Method*

Subjects: The Japanese subjects were 77 university English majors (15 males and 62 females) living in the Tokyo area. All had passed the Step 2 test, equivalent to English proficiency of TOEFL 450 or above. The American subjects were 48 university students (24 male and 24 female) specializing in various fields at two universities, one in Colorado and the other in Illinois. The average age of the Americans was 20.96 (range 17 to 28), while the average age of Japanese subjects was 20.17 (range 19 to 22).

In order to determine whether instruction may have had any effect, 17 native speakers of Japanese teaching English at college level were also administered the first section of the questionnaire (see Measure below). All had obtained either a master's degree or doctorate in teaching English or Applied Linguistics. This group had lived either in the U.K. or in the U.S.A. for periods from three months to four years.

Measure: In a paper and pencil questionnaire, subjects were asked to indicate their perceptions of politeness in requests. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section, to measure the degrees of politeness perceived by Japanese and American subjects, included 11 English sentences to be used in asking for a pen, with a seven-point rating scale. On the rating scale "1" meant "most uninhibited" whereas "7" indicated "most careful." Sets of opposites such as "polite" vs. "impolite" and "formal and informal" were avoided because Ide et al. (1986) suggested that these imply somewhat different connotations from their Japanese translations. As "polite" and "formal" might imply stiffness in manner (Ide et al., 1986), the adjectival pair of "uninhibited" and "careful" and their Japanese counterparts were used in the questionnaire.

In the second section, the same 11 English sentences were rated according to the appropriateness of each sentence toward people of different perceived distances to themselves: toward their academic advisor, a stranger they meet at a post office, and a close-friend. It was assumed that academic advisors are socially distant but psychologically either close to or distant from the subjects. In other words, the social status of advisors is high, and therefore, they should be respected, but psychological closeness depends on the subjects' interpersonal relationship with their advisors. A stranger they meet at a post office is socially unknown and psychologically distant. Here, the subjects' perceived distance is presumably not close. The distance to close-friends, not just acquaintances, is usually very close, both socially and psychologically.

In the third section, subjects, using the seven-point rating scale, indicated the acceptability of each sentence when it was used by a Japanese student toward the subject's academic advisor, a stranger at a post office, and a subject's close-friend. In other words, the addresser is a Japanese student, and the addressees are the people the subjects either know very well or is just a stranger. The addresser, however, is expected to know their social status. Affective factors toward subjects' advisors and close-friends might influence their acceptability judgment.

Unlike the study of Tajika and Niki (1991), which strictly differentiated requests (e.g., *Could you lend . . . ?*) from asking for permission (e.g., *May I borrow . . . ?*), this study treated both as requests in that a speaker's intended message is the same, i.e., "Let me use your pen," no matter what the form. In each section of the questionnaire, the mean ratings for the 11 requests were computed to obtain results in terms of degrees of politeness, appropriateness, and the acceptability of each sentence.

Results and Discussion

Degrees of politeness

The Japanese and American subjects indicated similar perceptions for the politeness levels for the 11 sentences. Table 1 shows the average ratings of degrees for politeness perceived by Japanese and American subject groups. Both groups felt that "I was wondering if I could borrow a pen" was the most polite request, followed by such interrogatives as "Could you lend me a pen?" and "Could I borrow a pen?" On the other hand, imperatives such as "Lend me a pen" and "Give me a pen" were seen as uninhibited requests.

Table 1: Degrees of Politeness

Request	Americans		Japanese		Rank Orders	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Americans	Japanese
1. I was wondering if I could...	6.29	1.15	6.49	1.00	1	1
2. May I borrow a pen?	6.02	1.36	4.21	1.54	2	6
3. Could you lend me a pen?	5.29	1.24	5.83	1.07	3	2
4. Could I borrow a pen?	5.19	1.16	5.60	1.07	4	3
5. Do you have a pen I can use?	5.17	1.36	4.65	1.59	5	4
6. Can you lend me a pen?	4.75	1.19	4.34	1.36	6	5
7. Can I borrow a pen?	4.38	1.31	3.90	1.40	7	7
8. Got a pen I can use?	2.33	1.00	2.51	1.43	8	9
9. Let me borrow a pen.	2.15	1.24	2.81	1.45	9	8
10. Lend me a pen.	1.44	0.92	1.30	0.61	10	10
11. Give me a pen.	1.27	1.11	1.22	0.50	11	11

Although Japanese and American subjects generally indicated similar degrees of politeness in the sentences, there was discrepancy in perceptions toward the interrogative "May I borrow a pen?" The American average rating for this interrogative was 6.02, the second most polite. On the other hand, the Japanese mean rating for the "May I . . . ?" form was only 4.21, almost in the neutral, zero-politeness zone. It was evident that the Japanese subjects did not see this expression as being as polite as the Americans did.

The Japanese subjects in this study seemed to apply a generalization which claims that "interrogatives with present tense modals are less polite than interrogatives with past tense modals." In fact, two interrogatives with past tense modals, "Could you lend me a pen?" and "Could I borrow a pen?" were perceived to be more polite than "May I borrow a pen?" Others have pointed out this generalization is basically true (Carrell & Konneker, 1981) but not always. It should be noted that it has been widely taught in high school classrooms in Japan.

To determine if instruction had played any significant role in the students' perceived politeness toward the 'May I . . . ?' form, 17 Japanese native speakers teaching English evaluated the degrees of politeness of the 11 sentences. The mean rating of the teachers was 5.29, between the mean rating of the American (6.02) and the Japanese (4.21) subjects. ANOVA results indicated that the mean ratings of the groups were statistically significantly different (see Table 2). Despite the educational and personal backgrounds of this group of Japanese educators, it was likely that the

Table 2: ANOVA for Politeness Degrees of "May I . . . ?"

<i>Source of variance</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Between groups	106.19	2	53.09	23.66*
Within groups	311.89	139	2.24	
Total	418.08	141		

* $p < .01$

Japanese educators had their own standards of judgment for the degree of politeness in the "May I . . . ?" form. Japanese EFL teachers in general, who do not have such backgrounds, may have even more difficulty indicating the native norm of politeness perception toward this interrogative, which may affect the teaching of the politeness level of this form.

Degrees of Appropriateness

Japanese and American subjects were asked to rate the degrees of appropriateness of the 11 sentences when used toward their academic advisor, a stranger they met at a post office, and a close friend. Means of Japanese and American subjects are shown in Table 3.

In general, American subjects, as well as their Japanese counterparts, appeared to use almost the same politeness level of requests when talking to an advisor or a stranger. Their average ratings of the sentences were quite similar and they rated polite sentences to be appropriate for such people. On the other hand, when asking a close friend for a pen, relatively uninhibited and casual expressions were perceived to be appropriate.

In the situations of borrowing a pen from an advisor and from a stranger, both the American and the Japanese subject groups tended to avoid using the most polite form. Americans rated "May I borrow a pen?" as most appropriate, followed by "I was wondering if I could borrow a pen." The third most appropriate form was "Do you have a pen I can use?" followed by the more polite interrogatives "Could I borrow a pen?" and "Could you lend me a pen?" Similarly, the Japanese chose their second most polite expression ("Could you lend me . . . ?") as the most appropriate form, ranking their most polite expression, "I was wondering if I could . . .," as third most appropriate. In general, both groups of subjects tended to prefer relatively polite forms but apparently not the most polite one. This seems to be the influence of the degree of imposition involved in borrowing a pen. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the degree of imposition plays an important role in the choice of politeness strategies. Niki and Tajika (1994) reported that the degree of imposition affected the Japa-

nese EFL learners' choice of request forms. In the present study, the item to be borrowed is a pen, which seems to have a low degree of imposition. Items with high degrees of imposition might draw different results.

There are some differences in the perceptions of Americans and Japanese in the close-friend situation (see Figures 1 & 2). While both subjects indicated that forms which were too polite were inappropriate (e.g., "I was wondering if I could . . ." was rated 3.83 by Americans and 2.26 by Japanese), Japanese perceptions of such polite forms as "Could you lend . . . ?" and "Could I borrow . . . ?" were quite different from those of Americans. The American means for these expressions were on the positive side of the scale (5.48 for both sentences), whereas the Japanese means were on the negative side (3.52 for "Could you lend . . . ?" and 3.69 for "Could I borrow . . . ?). Japanese may have assumed those interrogatives were too polite for close friends. Highly evaluated politeness degrees of "Could you/ I . . . ?" also suggested that this could be true. The Japanese mean for "Could

Table 3: Degrees of Appropriateness

Request	Advisor		Stranger		Close Friend							
	Americans M	SD	Japanese M	SD	Americans M	SD	Japanese M	SD				
May I borrow a pen?	6.50	1.03	4.69	1.44	6.58	0.71	5.21	1.28	5.90	1.22	5.09	1.35
I was wondering if I could . . .	6.17	1.23	5.65	1.44	6.15	1.22	5.56	1.42	5.65	1.34	5.39	1.28
Do you have a pen I can use?	5.54	1.07	4.21	1.36	5.69	1.09	4.71	1.47	5.63	1.58	4.47	1.56
Could I borrow a pen?	5.44	1.22	5.73	1.12	5.65	1.08	5.88	1.03	5.48	1.49	3.52	1.58
Could you lend me a pen?	5.31	1.29	5.88	1.30	5.42	1.22	6.17	0.94	5.48	1.43	3.69	1.65
Can I borrow a pen?	4.94	1.34	4.42	1.32	5.27	1.35	5.04	1.21	5.40	1.47	4.86	1.34
Can you lend me a pen?	4.88	1.30	4.38	1.44	4.98	1.59	5.14	1.20	4.90	1.65	5.03	1.40
Got a pen I can use?	2.33	1.21	2.32	1.23	2.96	1.57	2.47	1.10	4.50	1.90	4.69	1.47
Let me borrow a pen.	1.73	0.92	2.60	1.38	1.79	1.01	3.26	1.56	4.17	1.91	5.27	1.72
Lend me a pen.	1.31	0.97	1.36	1.02	1.38	0.79	1.60	0.92	3.83	2.16	2.26	1.42
Give me a pen.	1.13	0.73	1.17	0.50	1.19	0.73	1.43	0.72	3.52	2.07	4.99	1.83

you . . . ?” was 5.83 and the mean for “Could I . . . ?” was 5.60, indicating that the Japanese subjects perceived these forms to be more polite than their American counterparts.

In the close-friend case, the Japanese perceptions toward expressions with low politeness degrees were also different from those of the Americans (see Figures 1 & 2). The Japanese subjects tended to think that even lower degrees of requests could be used toward close friends, as in such imperatives as “Lend me a pen” (mean 5.27) and “Give me a pen” (mean 4.99). The Americans, on the other hand, saw those sentences as marginal (4.17 for “Lend . . .” and 3.52 for “Give . . .”). It appeared that while Japanese had a tendency to prefer neutral or casual expressions to polite ones, Americans did not. This was also borne out by the fact that their rating of the three most polite expressions (i.e., “I was wondering if I could . . . ,” “Could you lend me . . . ?” and “Could I borrow . . . ?”) coincided with their three least appropriate expressions.

Degrees of Acceptability

In the third section, both American and Japanese subjects, using the seven-point scale, indicated how acceptable each of the 11 sentences was when addressed to their academic advisor, a stranger at a post office, and a friend when a Japanese student was the addresser. The questionnaire indicated that this Japanese student did not have a close relationship with any of these three addressees. As stated earlier, it was assumed that the addresser could tell the social status of the addressees. It was also assumed that there would be both acceptable forms and unacceptable forms for American subjects even if they knew that the addresser was an international student whose pragmalinguistic competence was not fully native-like.

Discussion of acceptability is normally concerned with native speakers' acceptability judgment for non-native performance in that ESL/EFL teachers should know to what extent students' deviations can be accepted by native speakers. Here also, the results of acceptability judgment by American subjects could be represented as native norms. Ratings are in Table 4. Americans preferred “May I borrow . . . ?” regardless of who the addressee was. It is also clear that highly polite forms were generally preferred, even in the friend case, which had a supposedly casual atmosphere. However, although highly polite forms were preferred, the most polite form, “I was wondering if I could . . . ,” was chosen as the second most acceptable. Again, this is probably because the item borrowed, a pen, was expected to cause low imposition.

In all three cases, the American subjects showed a clear boundary between acceptable and unacceptable forms, with the exception of

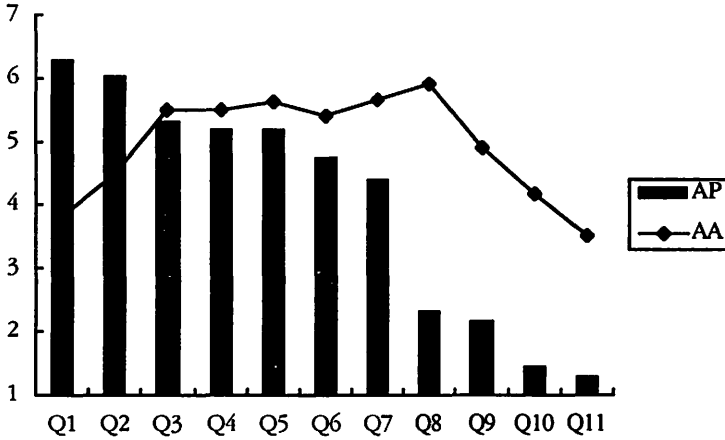
Table 4: Degrees of Acceptability

Request	Advisor Mean (SD)		Stranger Mean (SD)		Close Friend Mean (SD)	
	Americans	Japanese	Americans	Japanese	Americans	Japanese
	May I borrow a pen?	6.73 (0.64)	4.75 (1.41)	6.63 (0.98)	5.28 (1.25)	6.48 (1.17)
I was wondering if I could . . .	6.42 (1.07)	5.78 (1.33)	6.44 (1.09)	5.43(1.53)	6.13 (1.35)	4.25 (1.74)
Do you have a pen I can use?	5.92 (1.05)	6.07 (1.06)	5.92 (1.29)	4.57 (1.53)	5.96 (1.20)	5.13 (1.50)
Could I borrow a pen?	5.69 (1.24)	5.83 (1.05)	5.85 (1.07)	5.79 (1.00)	5.81 (1.30)	5.24 (1.46)
Could you lend me a pen?	5.69 (1.24)	5.83 (1.05)	5.85 (1.07)	5.79 (1.00)	5.81 (1.30)	5.24 (1.46)
Can I borrow a pen?	5.56 (1.17)	4.34 (1.29)	5.52 (1.37)	4.93 (1.29)	5.73 (1.35)	5.30 (1.25)
Can you lend me a pen?	5.42 (1.27)	4.46 (1.32)	5.35 (1.55)	5.09 (1.23)	5.58 (1.37)	5.26 (1.19)
Got a pen I can use?	2.63 (1.27)	2.43 (1.15)	2.94 (1.58)	2.68 (1.22)	4.02 (1.76)	3.62 (1.51)
Let me borrow a pen.	1.94 (1.10)	2.79 (1.52)	2.21 (1.49)	3.22 (1.38)	2.71 (1.81)	4.12 (1.45)
Lend me a pen.	1.46 (0.80)	1.54 (1.11)	1.44 (0.87)	1.83 (1.05)	2.00 (1.32)	2.91 (1.78)
Give me a pen.	1.08 (0.35)	1.30 (0.65)	1.17 (0.60)	1.49 (0.76)	1.54 (1.13)	2.72 (1.84)

"Got a pen I can use?" with a close friend. This sentence was almost on the boundary. Expressions with higher degrees of politeness than "Can I borrow a pen?" were determined to be acceptable. Unacceptable forms, on the other hand, were those with lower degrees of politeness than "Got a pen I can use?" It appeared that the more polite a sentence, the more preferable it was to American subjects. In other words, they would expect Japanese students to use rather polite expressions.

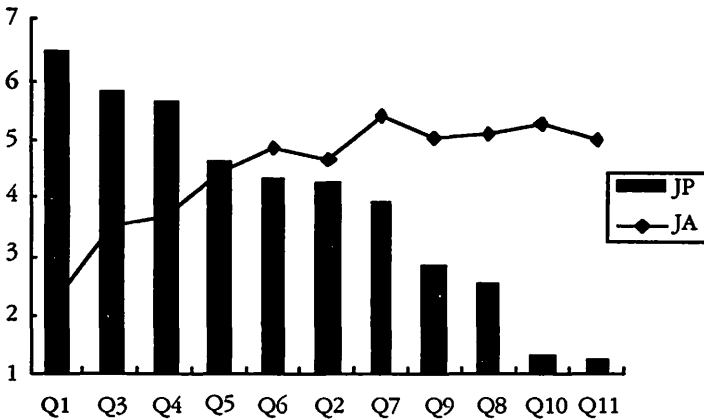
Japanese subjects also rated the acceptability of sentences, assuming the addresser was another Japanese student. When the addressee was a close friend, some interesting differences in Japanese and American perceptions were observed. The following point should be noted: Japanese subjects tended to think some expressions of lower degrees of politeness could be used by another Japanese. The Japanese mean rating of acceptability for "Let me borrow a pen" was 4.12, whereas the American mean was 2.71. Also, Japanese subjects tended to think that the po-

Figure 1: Degrees of Politeness and Appropriateness by Americans in the Close Friend Situation



AP = Degrees of Politeness by Americans
 AA = Degrees of Appropriateness by Americans

Figure 2: Degrees of Politeness and Appropriateness by Japanese in the Close Friend Situation



JP = Degrees of Politeness by Japanese
 JA = Degrees of Appropriateness by Japanese

lite expression as "I was wondering if I could . . ." was marginal in terms of its acceptability, whereas Americans indicated that this form was highly acceptable. The Japanese mean for this sentence was 4.25; the American mean 6.31. These results draw an important implication of which Japanese EFL learners should become aware: i.e., native speakers of English in general would expect them to use more polite expressions than they might think necessary or might use, even in casual interactions between college students.

Implications and Conclusions

The results of this study suggest some important implications for EFL classrooms in Japan. Some notable results center around Japanese underestimation of the degree of politeness of the "May I . . . ?" form, the degree of politeness appropriate in a close relationship, and the degree of politeness acceptable to native speakers of English.

Japanese students tended to underestimate the politeness level of the "May I . . . ?" form, which should be noted by classroom teachers. In this study, Japanese students rated this interrogative request to be almost neutral in politeness while Americans evaluated it as a very polite request. The politeness level of this particular form may be introduced as being relative to other request forms such as "I was wondering if I could . . ." and "Could I/Could you . . . ?" In this study, these all showed similar degrees of politeness as perceived by native speakers. The Japanese misconception of "May I . . . ?" may be due to instruction. As stated earlier, Japanese students are generally taught that "interrogatives with present tense modals are less polite than interrogatives with past tense modals." This might cause students to generalize that the "May I . . . ?" form is not as polite as "Could I/Could you . . . ?" and is quite similar to the politeness of "Can I/Can you . . . ?" Although the relationship between the students' proficiency and their judgment of the politeness level of English requests was not explored in this study, there may be some correlation. However, even Japanese teaching professionals with high English proficiency parted company from natives as to the politeness level of the "May I . . . ?" form. Their perceived degree of politeness for this particular request was between that of native speakers and Japanese students. This should be noted by both native and non-native teaching professionals, and the function and the politeness level of this particular form treated more carefully in Japanese EFL classrooms.

The next point of concern is regarding the appropriateness level of requests. Results showed that in the situation of close friend as an ad-

dressee, Japanese tended to think that they could use rather casual expressions, while Americans indicated that they might use more polite requests. For example, more Japanese than Americans might use such imperatives as "Lend me a pen" and "Give me a pen" in an actual interaction. In this study the Japanese subjects tended to evaluate these requests to be rather appropriate, while Americans judged them neutral in appropriateness. The Japanese preference for casual requests in the close-friend situation was also seen in their appropriateness judgment for "Could I borrow a pen?" and "Could you lend me a pen?" Many tended to think these to be inappropriate, and they preferred "Lend me a pen" and "Give me a pen." This was obviously not the case for Americans. This Japanese preference may be due to the transfer of a pragmatic concept and/or a linguistic function from the equivalent Japanese-speaking context. In borrowing a pen from a close friend, it is very common for a Japanese student to say "*Pen kashite* (Lend me a pen, will you?)." However, the English expression of "Lend me a pen, will you?" apparently cannot show exactly the same or even similar appropriateness level to this Japanese counterpart. Students need to be aware that such English imperatives as "Lend me a pen" and "Give me a pen" might be perceived as inappropriate, even with low imposition requests.

The third important implication is that Japanese should know that American students are likely to expect Japanese to use more polite expressions than they might think appropriate in borrowing a pen from a friend. As shown in the results, "Lend me a pen," for example, is a casual, uninhibited expression to Americans, appropriate for when addressing a friend. However, this particular imperative does not seem to be acceptable for American students when addressed by a Japanese student with whom the relationship is not close. They might simply think that the Japanese student is rude. It is likely that American students think a foreign student should use polite expressions rather than casual and colloquial ones. When a student's command of English is not fully like that of a native speaker, it is often safer for the learner to use polite expressions at all times.

Finally, there are some points to be taken into consideration for further studies on English requests. This study was limited in that it only examined Japanese and American perceptions to politeness in English expressions used in asking for a pen, which is presumed to have low imposition. Other pragmalinguistic aspects should be carefully considered in the future. However, it is almost impossible for a researcher to include a wide variety of aspects in one study at a time. Therefore, it is suggested that any future study should have a clear focus as to what it is

examining: e.g., whether it is looking at production or perception, whether it is examining the sentence level of expressions or whole discourse, or whether it is focusing on expressions in borrowing something or in requesting some kind of action.

The following questions are as yet unanswered by this study: To what extent does learners' English proficiency affect their performance?; and, how are learners' requests accepted by native English speakers of varied educational and social backgrounds? Even though a number of studies on English requests have been conducted to this date, there is still much more to explore.

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