

# Cross-culturally Speaking, Speaking Cross-culturally



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Speaking Cross-culturally

Edited by

Bert Peeters, Kerry Mullan and Christine Béal

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Edited by Bert Peeters, Kerry Mullan and Christine Béal

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# INTRODUCTION

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Issues in cross-cultural communication have exercised the minds of thousands of scholars world-wide and will no doubt continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Cross-cultural communication is often relatively unproblematic (as relatively unproblematic, that is, as communication within cultures), but it is a well-known fact that problems do develop from time to time and warrant the attention of linguists and applied linguists alike. Cross-cultural pragmatic failure, as it has been called, occurs because of insufficient knowledge, either of the formal rules of the language in which an interaction takes place (rules that relate to its lexicon, its phonetics, its syntax), or of more elusive aspects related to implicit cultural norms and values, often not adequately taught in foreign language classrooms. In the absence of appropriate cross-cultural *savoir-faire*, it can have disastrous repercussions for interpersonal relationships and lead to unhelpful stereotyping.

This volume, which aims to make a modest contribution to the fast growing body of cross-cultural literature published across the world, bears the name of an international conference organised in July 2009 at Macquarie University, Sydney, under the auspices of Macquarie's Department of International Studies and in close cooperation with the Département des Sciences du Langage, Université Montpellier 3, France. The phrase *cross-culturally speaking* was meant to emphasise the idea of speaking from a

cross-cultural point of view; the phrase *speaking cross-culturally* shifted the attention to the idea of speaking across cultures. Like its predecessor, the July 2007 Montpellier conference *Les enjeux de la communication interculturelle: Compétence linguistique, compétence pragmatique, valeurs culturelles*, which also resulted in a collective publication (Nathalie Auger, Christine Béal & Françoise Demougin, eds., *Interactions et interculturalité: variété des corpus et des approches*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2012), the Macquarie conference brought together a number of scholars interested in gaining a better understanding, through the study of actual communicative behaviour, of the various linguistic and pragmatic aspects of cross-cultural competence which are required for communication across cultural boundaries to be successful.

Conference participants were asked to situate their papers in one of three pre-defined approaches:

- A “comparative” approach which entails side-by-side observation of native speakers using their respective native languages in similar contexts or interactions. The comparative approach allows similarities and differences in usage and expectations in appropriately defined communicative contexts to be brought into focus, and thus paves the way towards formulating hypotheses on potentially sensitive points in cross-cultural situations.
- A “cross-cultural” approach which entails analysis of contact situations in which speakers belonging to different cultural backgrounds interact with one another. The cross-cultural approach allows identification of presumed obstacles in cross-cultural communication which appear to generate misunderstanding or interpersonal clashes, and thus paves the way towards the identification of underlying cultural values which are relevant for one or more of the speakers but not for all.
- A “pedagogical” approach which relies on observation of interlanguage behaviour among peers, comparing it to native performance in similar contexts or interactions. The pedagogical approach relies on simulations and allows L1 interferences on L2 to be brought into focus and thus complements findings achieved within a cross-cultural approach.

Preliminary versions of six of the eight papers included in this volume were presented at the conference, and selected for inclusion on the basis of their intellectual rigour as well as of a stringent anonymous peer-review



process which has resulted in extensive rewriting. The two remaining papers (by Gassner and Peeters) were similarly subjected to blind peer scrutiny. The editors would like to thank the many colleagues who agreed to take part in the peer-review process; this volume owes its existence to each and every one of them. The editors also gratefully acknowledge the editorial assistance provided by Dominique Irlinger, who ensured that all due processes were followed and who laid the groundwork for the camera-ready copy.

The papers included in this volume have been allocated to three parts which group similar contributions, more or less in line with the approaches detailed above. Part One deals with cross-cultural encounters, Part Two makes cross-cultural comparisons and Part Three focuses on ways to help the cross-cultural learner.

## **Cross-Cultural Encounters**

The two papers which make up the first part are by Yoko Sato and Denise Gassner, respectively.

Sato investigates the oral communication problems of Japanese tertiary learners of intermediate English, with a particular focus on cross-cultural pragmatic problems experienced by a native speaker interlocutor. Sato uses the Retrospective Verbal Report technique to analyse pragmatic problems, to investigate how these might influence communication and to determine whether Japanese learners of English are aware of the possible negative effects of their own performance. Several learner features are found to be problematic from the native speaker's point of view, but these had not been identified by the Japanese students, indicating the need to incorporate pragmatic instruction into the English language classroom.

In her study, Gassner takes a comparative approach to examine the relationship between formality and culture in employment interview responses by native and non-native speakers of English. While the author makes a strong claim for the cultural background of the speaker having a strong influence on the level of formality chosen, the analysis shows that inherent properties of the speech event also determine the formality level chosen. Of particular note in this study is how Gassner illustrates that the use of informal language can downplay power differences (i.e. mitigation<sup>P</sup>) while the use of formal language can enhance or strengthen them and, thus, introduce the opposite effect (i.e. boosting<sup>P</sup>).

## Cross-Cultural Comparisons

The second part contains papers by Maicol Formentelli & John Hajek, Christine Béal & Kerry Mullan, and Huimin Xie.

The first paper, by Formentelli & Hajek, presents an important comparison of the English and Italian address systems employed in two universities, one Australian and the other Italian. The results show an asymmetrical distribution of forms in interactions, with students in Australian classrooms employing mainly formal lexical strategies upwards to lecturers and receiving informal vocatives in return. Symmetrical informal address follows relatively quickly on invitation from the lecturer, however. This contrasts with student/lecturer interactions in Italian universities, where speakers employ reciprocal use of the polite pronoun *Lei*, and a shift to reciprocal familiar forms is rare and takes longer. The authors show that although the choice of address strategies in Australian and Italian academic settings is influenced by the same sociolinguistic and contextual parameters, such factors are evaluated differently by speakers of Australian English and Italian, resulting in divergent patterns of address.

Béal & Mullan employ a cross-cultural perspective to examine the use of spontaneous humour in social interaction in French and Australian English. The authors argue that traditional folk categories such as jokes, anecdotes, wordplay or teasing are not readily suited to a discourse based analysis of humour, due to the difficulty in separating these aspects. Béal & Mullan propose a new four-dimensional model for the analysis of conversational humour using a cross-cultural and interactional approach. The authors analyse several examples from their two corpora, demonstrating how humour is created interactionally by the participants over several turns. Similarities and differences in the way French and Australian English speakers use conversational humour are presented, and the links to the participants' respective underlying ethos and cultural values are explored.

The third paper dealing with cross-cultural comparisons is by Xie, who presents a sociolinguistic discourse analysis of the speech event of giving advice in Wu Chinese. The author analyses advising sessions involving recent high school graduates and/or their parents talking with their families, friends, teachers and other education experts. Xie examines the content and forms of this speech event in relation to the variables of social distance and power relationship, while re-examining the universality of

Brown & Levinson's (1987) concept of face. The author concludes that advice-giving in this context in Wu Chinese is not a face threatening act in the sense of Brown & Levinson, and that, instead, the Chinese conception of face, *lian* and *mianzi*, accounts for the findings.

## Helping the Cross-Cultural Learner

The three contributions in the third part were written by Marika Kalyuga, Colette Mrowa-Hopkins and Bert Peeters, and have in common a particular focus on assisting cross-cultural learners.

Kalyuga's study examines the ways in which the cross-linguistic comparison of conceptual metaphors can help learners with their comprehension of grammar and, therefore, can facilitate the learning of a foreign language. The author illustrates this by using Russian expressions for mental activity historical meaning shifts and polysemy extensions based on the location event-structure metaphor and the object event-structure metaphor.

In her paper, Mrowa-Hopkins underscores the pedagogic value of an ethnographic approach to intercultural understanding within university courses dealing with second languages and cultures. Such an approach emphasises the need for students to develop an ability to engage in critical reflection on their own cultural values and knowledge, explores the ambiguity inherent in intercultural life and gives access to the deepest tacit cultural structures of the mind and emotions. The author describes the implementation of pedagogical tasks aimed at recognising cues to emotion communication; this can be used by learners to express their own feelings and to respond to interlocutors in ways that are considered acceptable by members of the target group. In this way learners should reflect on their own identity and themselves as human beings while engaged in analysing culture as multiple and constructed.

The final paper in this section, and indeed the volume, is by Peeters, who agrees with Mrowa-Hopkins on the importance for all foreign language learners to gain an early awareness of the cultural values and communicative norms of those whose language they are learning. As Peeters points out, immersion in the language-culture usually achieves that end, as it is through immersion in a foreign culture that differences with one's own culture come to the fore. Peeters proposes that exploitation of selected resources in the (advanced) foreign language classroom is likely to facilitate subsequent immersion. The author goes on to define five

ethnolinguistic pathways which will help the foreign language learner discover and/or gain a better understanding of the values upheld by the native speakers of the language they are learning. Applied ethnolinguistics illustrates how the study of culturally salient words, phrases, productive syntactic patterns and communicative behaviours can lead to the discovery of cultural values which then become the subject of further investigation leading to either the confirmation or rejection of their assumed status.

## The Editors

Bert Peeters is Associate Professor of French at Macquarie University, Sydney. His main research interests are in the areas of French linguistics, intercultural communication, and language and cultural values. He is currently working on a monograph dealing with French language and cultural values. Over the years, he has authored and edited a number of volumes written in English as well as French dealing with historical phonology (1992), the lexicon-encyclopedia interface (2000), the natural semantic metalanguage approach (1993, 2006) and French sociolinguistics (2009). He has also contributed chapters to several edited volumes and has published papers, reviews and review articles in a wide range of international journals.

Kerry Mullan is Senior Lecturer and coordinator of French Studies at RMIT University, Melbourne. Her main research interests are cross-cultural communication, discourse analysis and differing interactional styles. Her book on expressing opinions in French and Australian English discourse (2010) contrasts the distinct styles of French and Australian English speakers, specifically the interactional functions and semantics of the expression *I think* and its three French (approximate) equivalents. She is currently investigating humour in French and Australian English social visits with colleagues Christine Béal and Véronique Traverso and has written a number of other publications on cross-cultural pragmatics, subjectivity and applied linguistics.

Christine Béal is Professor in Linguistics and Communication in the *Sciences du langage* department at the Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3. She is a member of the Praxiling-CNRS (U.M.R. 5267) research team and editor in chief of the academic journal *Les Cahiers de Praxématique*. She has also co-edited a number of other volumes on cross-cultural communication. Her main research interests are discourse analysis, conversational analysis, cross-cultural pragmatics and cultural

values. Her latest book (2010) examines everyday interactions in French and English. Other publications include a wide range of book chapters and journal articles on forms of address, politeness rituals and the pragmatic functions of humour.



## **PART I**

### **CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS**





# CHAPTER ONE

## RETROSPECTIVE VERBAL REPORTS AS A WAY TO INVESTIGATE CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATIC PROBLEMS IN ORAL INTERACTION<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports the results of a study investigating the oral communication problems of Japanese university students learning English, with a specific focus on the cross-cultural pragmatic problems experienced by a native speaker (NS) interlocutor. The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of the problems as perceived by the communicators themselves in contextualised interaction, and to identify instructional priorities. By using the Retrospective Verbal Report (RVR) technique, the study aimed to go beyond inferences based on performance analysis and the use of discourse completion tasks, which have been prevalent in past cross-cultural communication research.

The participants were thirty-two students at an intermediate level of English proficiency. Interaction was elicited through a video-recorded one-to-one, face-to-face interview conducted by a NS interlocutor. The video-recording was used as a prompt in the subsequent one-to-one RVR sessions conducted by the researcher, in which the learners and the NS interlocutor were asked to verbalise problems encountered during the interaction. The key significance of the RVRs is that they provide information as to which learner features actually cause pragmatic problems, how these influence communication and whether the learners are aware of the negative effects of their own performance.

The results indicate that, in the eyes of the NS interlocutor, turn-initial silences, lack of eye contact, under-elaborated responses and flat intonation caused the most serious pragmatic problems. These features were interpreted as indicative of the learners' lack of interest and willingness to communicate. However, the learners' RVRs showed little awareness of the negative impact of these features, seemingly because these are accepted aspects of communication in Japanese.

The findings suggest the effectiveness of the combined use of an interactive task and the RVR technique when investigating cross-cultural pragmatic problems. They also indicate the need for incorporating pragmatics instruction into English language classrooms.

## 1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, strong emphasis has been placed in Japan on English language education. However, only recently has oral communication received serious attention. A pilot questionnaire survey preceding the present study shows that the quality of English oral communication classes in secondary schools varies considerably across courses and teachers. Typical contents include choral repetitions, role-play exercises and one-way talk by a native-speaker (NS) teacher. It seems that many Japanese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL)<sup>2</sup> have little opportunity for spontaneous, authentic exchanges in English before entering university. It is perhaps due to this that oral communication has traditionally been considered as one of the most problematic areas for Japanese university students. Consequently, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has emphasised the need for improvement in this area (MEXT 2003). The first step towards the development of effective pedagogical approaches is arguably to identify the areas in which learners need most help and to establish instructional priorities. It has been pointed out that pragmatic inappropriateness of language learners seriously affects the social and personal relationship they will develop in real life (e.g. Thomas 1983). However, there is a dearth of research on pragmatic problems *actually* experienced by a NS interlocutor when interacting with Japanese EFL learners. This study aims to explore this neglected area and to provide insights into the areas of priority for EFL oral communication instruction at Japanese universities. It is also hoped that the findings have some research and pedagogical implications for a wider learner population.

## 2. Cross-cultural pragmatic problems

What makes pragmatics particularly problematic in cross-cultural communication is the fact that people are usually unaware that different communicative behaviours are considered appropriate in different languages and cultures (Wolfson 1983: 62). As a result, while NSs tend to tolerate purely linguistic mistakes in interacting with non-native speakers (henceforth referred to as L2 speakers) (Thomas 1983: 96), pragmatically inappropriate behaviour tends to be misinterpreted “in attitudinal terms”, such as “unfriendly, impertinent, rude, [or] uncooperative” (Gumperz 1982: 132; see also Thomas 1983: 97, Wolfson 1983: 62). The subsequent misunderstandings “can interfere with social, academic, and professional opportunities for L2 speakers” (Tanaka 1997, quoted in Matsuda 1999: 40; see also Gumperz 1982, 1995, 1996, Thomas 1983). Moreover, unlike linguistic mistakes, which often cause non-understanding and are signalled by the interlocutor, the unpleasantness caused by pragmatic inappropriateness is often not explicitly expressed by the offended party. This makes it extremely difficult for L2 learners to realise and correct their own faux pas.

Because of the serious effects of pragmatic problems and the difficulty of naturally acquiring pragmatic conventions due to their “invisible” nature, Thomas (1983, 1995) emphasises the importance of incorporating pragmatics into L2 instruction. However, typical FL instruction “emphasise[s] microlevel grammatical accuracy at the expense of macrolevel pragmatic appropriateness” (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei 1998: 254), and is characterised by the “predominance of the referential over other speech functions” (Kasper 1982: 107). In Japan, the situation is exacerbated by the backwash of university entrance examinations (Ellis 1991, Kubota 1995). Furthermore, even the teachers, whether NS or L2 speakers, do not necessarily have adequate knowledge and awareness of pragmatic conventions (Wolfson 1983; see also Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei 1998). As a result, FL learners are rarely given instruction on this aspect of communication. It has been reported that “even advanced language learners often show a marked imbalance ... of their communicative competence, with pragmatic competence lagging behind grammatical knowledge” (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei 1998: 234; see also Ellis 1991, Kasper 1992, 2000, Nakane 2003, Ross 1998, Rossiter 1989).

### 3. Major findings of past research on Japanese EFL learners

Kasper (1997a: 346) refers to pragmatic problems as “communicative events which fall short of participants’ actional (illocutionary and perlocutionary) and relational goals”. They have been investigated in several research fields with different theoretical perspectives, foci and methodological approaches, both in and out of the target-language environment (i.e. second language [SL] and foreign language [FL] contexts respectively). Many interlanguage pragmatics studies have found instances of first language (L1) transfer of linguistic speech act strategies in the performances of Japanese learners of English, which could potentially have negative communicative effects. For example, Japanese FL/SL learners:

- differentiate their refusals according to the status of the speakers as opposed to the closeness of the relationship, which differentiates NS behaviour (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz 1990);
- make less specific excuses for refusals and sound more formal in tone compared to NS samples (*ibid.*);
- apologise in situations which typically elicit an expression of gratitude from NSs (Narita & Young 1994: 76; see also Nakamichi 2000);
- tend to use a more direct “Request for Action” in requests, whereas NSs favour a less direct “Request for Permission” (Rossiter 1989, Rossiter & Kondoh 2001).

Intercultural communication researchers frequently mention the problematic silences of Japanese EF/SL learners. They claim that it is their native collectivist culture that often leads Japanese EFL speakers to use silence as a strategy to avoid losing face (e.g. Hofstede 2005). For example, students may fall silent instead of risking wrong answers or explicitly admitting the inability to answer, since “whether shame is felt depends on if the infringement has become known by others” (Hofstede 2005: 89). NS interlocutors may perceive such silences negatively as “a lack of interest in the other person, a lack of willingness to disclose, or a reluctance to get close to the other person” (Tannen & Saville-Troike 1985, quoted in Davies 1998: 286). Their individualist cultures are characterised by low-context communication (Hall 1976), which expects messages to be expressed explicitly and verbally. However, because of the subconscious and invisible nature of pragmatic conventions referred to above, “Japanese

performing in English often do not realise how much distress is caused by remaining silent for long periods” (Loveday 1982: 8).

Some empirical studies in a classroom setting have supported this. For example, Japanese EF/SL learners’ silence was perceived by NS teachers as a lack of “interest” and “commitment” (Nakane 2003: 302), passivity, inability and/or unwillingness to speak (Dwyer & Heller-Murphy 1996, Harumi 1999, Lawrie 2006, Nakamichi 2000). However, close qualitative examinations in some of these studies (Harumi 1999, Lawrie 2006, Nakane 2003) indicate that what caused negative reactions in the NS interlocutors was not silent pauses *per se*, but those occurring at the turn-initial position, where “learners need to display comprehension and competence by projecting the beginning of their turn” (He & Young 1998: 14). Turn-initial silences are “ambiguous and difficult to interpret” (Nakane 2003: 308) from the NS viewpoint; because of the “high inferential demands” they place on the addressee, they are at risk of being one of the “least polite forms” (Sifianou 1997, quoted in Nakane 2003: 311). It has been reported in various studies that NSs (Nakane 2003) and proficient/fluent L2 speakers (Fulcher 1996, Young & Halleck 1998) verbally express their problems, think aloud and/or use interactional meta-comments such as “I don’t know how to say...” (Young & Halleck 1998: 377). The studies suggest that such verbal expressions of thought processes may be preferable to silence since they at least signal the speakers’ attempt to communicate. However, most of the Japanese learners in these studies appeared to be unaware of the negative effect of their silences and/or the need to fill pauses. In fact, Nakane’s interviews with learners revealed that they sometimes used silence as “a strategy to avoid loss of face” (2003: 311). Harumi (1999) suggests that the learners’ use of silences may be influenced by Japanese cultural values, which “emphasise accurately expressed thoughtful comments, and encourage accurate expressions”, and therefore make longer pauses acceptable. It is important to note that Nakane’s participants were advanced ESL learners and that she did not find any association between the number of silences and linguistic proficiency.

Under-elaboration is another performance feature of Japanese EF/SL learners which has been frequently reported as causing pragmatic problems. Intercultural communication researchers (e.g. Andersen 1994, Ishii & Bruneau 1994) and some L2 contrastive analysts (e.g. Loveday 1982, Thompson 2001) argue that Japanese EF/SL learners transfer their high-context communication style (Hall 1976), which does not require all information to be explicitly expressed verbally. This results in the

production of linguistically and factually accurate minimal utterances, which “frustrate” (Loveday 1982: 5) English NSs from a low-context communication culture, where information “must be elaborated, clearly communicated and highly specific” (Andersen 1994: 236; see also Poyatos 2002b: 321). This has been supported by some empirical studies, many of which were conducted in language proficiency interview settings and used the conversational analytic approach. These studies show that East Asian (including Japanese) EF/SL learners tend to provide under-elaborated responses, which seem to have a negative effect on the NS interviewers’ perception of their performance (e.g. He 1998, Ross 1998, Young 1995, Young & Halleck 1998). Ross (1998: 344) observed that even linguistically advanced interviewees provided under-elaborated answers to “seemingly innocuous” questions, such as family or work. They elaborated on their responses only when prompted by the NS interviewers. He suggests that the interviewees may have adopted “a minimalist approach” (ibid.: 339) based on L1 pragmatic conventions. In Japan, the interview situation is interpreted as “bestow[ing] the speaking rights to the interviewer, while the candidates’ role is to provide exact responses to questions” (ibid.: 343). The interviewees are expected to speak “concisely without appearing superfluous or verbose—two traits that are not particularly valued in the Japanese speech community” (ibid.: 339, drawing on Lebra 1987). Alternatively, learners may have used under-elaboration as “a culture-specific strategy” (ibid.: 344) to indicate an unwillingness to answer “potentially face-threatening” (ibid.: 346) questions. However, NS interviewers, whose culture values elaboration and talkativeness (Ross 1998, Young & Halleck 1998: 366, 378), seem to perceive the learners as “uncooperative conversationalists” (Young & Halleck 1998: 364). They seem to feel that these learners infringe Grice’s (1989: 26) maxim of quantity and demand excessive effort to elicit adequate utterances. He (1998) observed that under-elaborated responses sometimes occur after the turn-initial silences discussed above, the two together leaving a negative impression on the NS interviewers. It should be noted that, in a slightly different context (a job interview of a Pakistani applicant by a UK NS), Gumperz (1995: 113-114) observed that it was the recurrence of under-elaboration that caused serious problems:

[It] is the cumulative effect of what happens in the course of the encounter that suggests lack of cooperation. One single instance of a violation might have passed as a lapse.

A limited number of studies on paralanguage have suggested that Japanese EF/SL speakers' lack of eye contact and flat intonation may cause pragmatic problems. It is argued that, in Japanese culture, eye contact is not considered important (Porter & Samovar 1994: 17) or is even consciously avoided to show respect (Poyatos 2002b: 244). On the other hand, cultures of English-speaking countries encourage eye contact to show "conversational involvement" (Gumperz 1982, Tannen 1989) such as "attention and interest" (Beattie 1980: 133, drawing on Argyle & Cook 1976). Hence, NS interlocutors may misinterpret Japanese EF/SL learners' eye aversion as the absence of such involvement (Poyatos 2002b: 243, Cameron 2001: 107, Hawrysh & Zaichkowsky 1990). Kameda (2002: 14) notes that flat intonation is often used by Japanese speakers of English, which can be interpreted as "disinterest or boredom or worse yet sarcasm". However, this is only based on general observation, not on any empirical evidence. Gumperz's (1982) study, although not conducted on Japanese EF/SL speakers, commands attention since it is one of the very few empirical studies of pragmatic problems caused by prosodic features of L2 speakers. He found (*ibid.*: 173) that Indian and Pakistani ESL speakers were "perceived as surly and uncooperative" by their British customers because they used falling intonation in their questions rather than the rising intonation normally used by British NSs. Gumperz (1982, 1995, 1996) emphasises the important role of prosody as a "contextualisation cue", which signals how the speaker's communicative intent should be interpreted. He warns that its misinterpretation could cause serious interpersonal and social consequences, especially when people from different speech communities interact.

#### **4. Limitations of past research and suggestions for further study**

Past research has provided some insights into possible causes of cross-cultural pragmatic problems experienced by NS interlocutors while interacting with Japanese EF/SL learners. However, there are a few serious limitations, which impinge on the usefulness of the findings.

First, L2 performance has been typically approached from a normative/prescriptive (as opposed to a communicative/descriptive) perspective. This has led to what Bley-Vroman (1983) calls a "comparative fallacy". The main focus has been on the analysis of deviations from NS norms and models, assuming them to be "communicatively disruptive regardless of whether they actually caused trouble or not" (Kasper 1997a: 355-356).

Kasper (*ibid.*: 356, drawing on Meeuwis 1994) points out that NS interlocutors may employ “a metastrategy of ‘communicative leniency’” and adjust their expectations according to the proficiency of the L2 speakers and the purpose of the communicative event. Intercultural communication researchers have attempted to describe people’s behaviour only in terms of different types of culture, and this has been criticised as prescriptive and risking “reductionist overgeneralization” (Holliday 1999: 237).

Secondly, past research has failed to provide a holistic picture of cross-cultural pragmatic problems because the investigations have been conducted separately in several different fields, each with a narrow scope. For example, interlanguage pragmatics has almost exclusively focused on inappropriate linguistic realisations of speech acts resulting from L1 transfer. However, there are other causes of pragmatically inappropriate L2 performance, such as “teaching-induced errors” (Kasper 1982, Thomas 1983: 101-103) and individual stylistic differences (He 1998, Young & Halleck 1998). Also, as Kasper (1997b: paragraph 1) notes, “communicative action includes not only speech acts ... but also participation in conversation ... and sustaining interaction in complex speech events”. Theories of communicative competence conceptualise pragmatic competence as related not only to verbal but also to non-verbal forms of communication (Canale 1983, Swain 1984; see also Wilson 2004). However, not enough attention has been paid to non-verbal communication in L2 teaching or learning research (Fujimoto 2003: paragraph 1). Even fewer studies have been conducted on the pragmatic effect of L2 learners’ prosodic features. Although a specific focus permits detailed and thorough investigations, a broad scope is crucial in order to identify areas that pose particularly serious problems and to make suggestions for instructional priorities.

Finally, there are some serious methodological shortcomings in each research field that limit the generalisability of the findings to real-life communication. In eliciting learner data, interlanguage pragmatics studies almost exclusively rely on role-play questionnaires called Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), and this has been criticised as seriously impinging on the validity of the findings (Wolfson 1983, Beebe et al. 1990, Ellis 1991, McDonough 1995). Data elicited via oral role-play are no less questionable, particularly when the situations are unrealistic to the participants.<sup>3</sup> Intercultural communication researchers typically speak in general terms and/or base their claims on anecdotal evidence from different contexts (Andersen 1994: 231), without conducting systematic empirical investigations. There are a few empirical studies dealing with actual



communication problems experienced by interactants in naturally occurring interactions (e.g. Gumperz 1983, 1995). However, they are extremely small-scale and focus on ESL populations in vocational contexts, which are very different from the learners investigated in this study.

Thus, what is needed is an empirical descriptive study which investigates pragmatic problems as experienced by the interlocutor. It should use a data collection method which is “ecologically valid” (Kasper & Kellerman 1997: 12) and encompass not only verbal but also non-verbal aspects of communication. Such a study will enable us to go beyond inferences about pragmatic problems and to provide insights into the areas of priority for EFL oral communication instruction. The present study aims to achieve this through the use of a face-to-face interaction task and the retrospective verbal report (RVR) technique.

## **5. Research question**

The following research question is addressed in this paper: what features of Japanese EFL learners’ performance cause pragmatic problems as perceived by a NS interlocutor in face-to-face oral interaction?

Following and expanding on Thomas’ (1983) concept of pragmatic failure, a pragmatic problem is defined in this study as a failure or difficulty in interpreting the learner-speaker’s intention or maintaining interaction. The focus of this paper is the NS interlocutor’s perception and not the analysis of observed phenomena (e.g. errors or non-target-like features in learner performance) *per se*.

## **6. Method**

### **6.1 Interaction task**

A one-to-one, face-to-face oral proficiency interview of approximately 15 minutes was chosen as the interaction task, because it seemed to strike a balance amongst the competing criteria of authenticity, interactiveness, feasibility, elicibility, controllability and assessability,<sup>4</sup> which are considered important in obtaining the data sought in this study. It might be argued that the kind of interaction occurring in an interview is unique to the task, especially in terms of the asymmetrical distribution of turns and power in controlling the topic (Johnson & Tyler 1998). However, it has been pointed out that interviews have some conversational characteristics,

such as the accommodation of supportive behaviour to individual learner-candidates (Lazaraton 1996) and question-answer adjacency pairs common in conversation (He 1998). Furthermore, the exact content can be adapted to individual learners' interest (Buck 1989: 1-2, quoted in Lazaraton 1996: 154, Davies 1998). Also, as Moder & Halleck (1998: 118) point out, informal conversation is "just one type of speech event". Interviews are not only "a crucial part of everyday life" but also have "significant consequences, ... determining access to services or occupational opportunities" (ibid.: 118-119; see also He & Young 1998: 11). In particular, oral proficiency interviews often have a decisive influence on L2 speakers' choice of academic and vocational opportunities. Therefore, the interview format is considered relevant and important.

Amongst validated formats, Part 1 of the speaking test of the Preliminary English Test (PET) and Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) (Cambridge ESOL 2001a, 2001b) were selected as the bases for designing the task, as these best met the above-mentioned criteria.<sup>5</sup> The interview consisted of three main phases, which were designed to elicit different types of interaction and utterances on different topics: warm-up, interaction, and long turn and challenge. The learners were asked to talk about simple and familiar topics, such as their home town, family, hobbies and English study. In order to provide a social context that is generalisable to broader settings, the learners were advised, both orally and in writing, that what they were going to have was not a language test but an interaction with a British NS who is completely unfamiliar with Japanese language and culture; in addition, if they wished to do so, they could ask the NS any questions, at any time.

Each interview was video-recorded and used as a recollection cue to elicit retrospective verbal reports (RVRs) (see below). The researcher was also present and took notes on salient features to be explored in the RVR sessions. In order to minimise observer effects, three precautions were taken: a small video-camera was set a few metres away from the participants prior to their arrival; two very small audio-recorders were placed near the video-camera and only a very inconspicuous sensitive microphone was put on the desk near the learner; the researcher sat behind the learner sideways at some distance so that she was invisible to the learner but could still observe his/her behaviour unobtrusively. Participants were informed in advance of the presence of the recording devices and the researcher as well as the non-evaluative nature of the note-taking. In addition, they spent approximately 10 minutes in the room receiving

instructions and asking questions so that they became familiar with the recording devices and the physical environment. Both audio and visual data were later transcribed for analysis.

## **6.2 Interlocutor**

The role of the interlocutor was extremely important in this study; he/she needed to elicit parallel data across all learners, which were adequate in both amount and content, to evaluate the learners' performance in a reliable manner and to provide detailed RVRs. Therefore, a qualified and experienced NS interviewer-examiner was chosen, although the researcher was fully aware that the perception of such an expert might be different from that of a "naïve" NS. The interviewer selected was a British female NS, who did not speak or understand much Japanese and was not overly familiar with Japanese culture despite living in Japan. In order to minimise interlocutor variables, only one person, who was known to none of the learners, was selected. She was provided with the interviewer guidelines, which contained the topics, sample questions and corresponding phases. Interviewer behaviour, such as the amount and type of support, was also controlled by the use of an interviewer frame. In order to reduce the effects of fatigue, data were collected over a year, with a maximum of four interviews per day.

## **6.3 Learners**

Thirty-two first- and second-year Japanese university students of approximately intermediate level written English ability participated in the study. An equal number of male and female students, aged between 18 and 20, were selected from three major disciplines (engineering, social science, humanities), according to the representative profile developed through a large-scale pre-study questionnaire survey (N=506). The assessment of interview performances by the NS interlocutor indicates that the learner-participants' oral communication ability ranged from pre-intermediate to intermediate.

## **6.4 Retrospective verbal reports (RVRs)**

As mentioned above, pragmatic problems are rarely expressed by the offended or bewildered party and therefore not observable in performance data. The RVR technique allows access to this usually hidden information through the post-task verbalisation of thoughts and feelings during task

performance. More specifically, it can reveal which L2 performance features *actually* cause pragmatic problems, how these features influence communication and whether the L2 speakers are aware of the negative effect of their own performance. Although there is considerable disagreement over the validity and reliability of this method (for discussion of this issue, see Cohen 1984, 1987, 1998 and Ericsson & Simon 1993), many researchers agree that “verbal reports, elicited with care and interpreted with full understanding of the circumstances under which they were obtained, are, in fact, a valuable and thoroughly reliable source of information about cognitive processes” (Ericsson & Simon 1980: 247). The present study mainly draws on Poulisse, Bongaerts & Kellerman (1987), who succeeded in maximising the benefits and minimising the drawbacks of this technique by designing procedures following Ericsson & Simon’s (1984) suggestions.

The RVR sessions were conducted by the researcher on a one-to-one basis, first with the NS and then with the learner. In order to minimise memory loss, RVRs were elicited immediately after each interview. Oral and written instructions were provided in the participants’ L1s. They emphasised that the participants were to verbalise only what they were thinking at the time of interaction and nothing that emerged while they were watching the video, and that they should limit themselves to what they clearly remembered and not add anything they guessed or inferred. It was also stressed that the researcher was not interested in checking the learners’ mistakes or knowledge of English but the participants’ thoughts and feelings. The learners were not informed about the details of the RVR sessions prior to the interview so that their performance would not be influenced. The participants were allowed to choose the language or a combination of languages of verbalisation. All of them chose their respective L1s. It was observed in the pilot study that the learners who were more familiar with the researcher tended to provide more verbalisation. On the other hand, it was suspected that if the researcher was the participants’ teacher of a credit-bearing course, the participant might worry about the possible negative effect of their performance and RVRs on their grades, and this could in turn influence the data. In order to address these issues, the learner-participants were chosen from the researcher’s former students wherever possible. To a few current students, it was emphasised that the project was completely independent of the course work and their performance would not affect their grades in any way.

Two types of RVRs were elicited in order to obtain different kinds of information sought in the present study. At the beginning of the RVR sessions, the participants were asked, without recall cues, to comment on their overall impressions of the interview (General RVRs), with a specific focus on particularly serious communication problems. They were allowed to comment on as many problems as they experienced. General comments elicited without memory-retrieval cues are said to be less valid and reliable than those on specific instances elicited with prompts (Ericsson & Simon 1993). Therefore, the results should be treated with caution. However, this process was considered necessary in obtaining spontaneous comments on experiences that were of particular psychological salience or importance to the participants and/or on the cumulative effect of multiple instances of problems. This was then followed by Specific RVRs, which aimed to elicit comments on specific instances of problems, irrespective of their relative seriousness and salience. The video-recordings of the interviews were used as recollection cues to enhance the completeness and accuracy of verbalisation. The researcher played the video and the participants were instructed to request that the video be stopped when they wanted to make any comments. The NS reported in the piloting stage that the visual cues were useful especially in remembering specific problems related to body language. All learners indicated that the use of video-recording was useful in the post-RVR questionnaire (see below). The researcher prompts were kept to a minimum in order to minimise the risk of inducing inaccurate verbalisation and tiring the participants. However, when the researcher judged it necessary, she prompted the participants by asking indirect questions such as “Did you understand what the learner said there?” (to the NS) or “You were pausing there. Do you remember what you were thinking about?” (to the learners). Special care was taken not to ask leading questions in order to avoid researcher bias. The prompts were sometimes used to check the learners’ awareness of the negative impact of their performance indicated in the NS’s RVRs.

At the end of each RVR session, the learner was asked to complete a post-RVR questionnaire about their perception of the RVR task.<sup>6</sup> The results indicate that most learners (n=23) did not have difficulty providing RVRs. More than 80% of the learners (n=26) reported that they could verbalise 80% or more of their thoughts in their RVRs, with half the learners 90% or more. Nearly 90% of the learners (n=28) said they were motivated to give RVRs, with none indicating they were “demotivated”. Twenty-two learners reported that it was a valuable opportunity to reflect

on their own performance, which in turn motivated them to increase their study efforts.

On average, the NS's RVRs lasted approximately 43 minutes per interview, and the learners' RVRs approximately 55 minutes. The RVR sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed (see Appendix for the transcription conventions). As stated above, the present study focuses on problems experienced by the NS interlocutor, as opposed to those inferred by the researcher-analyst through observation. Therefore, the identification and the classification of problems were solely based on the interlocutor's RVR comments indicating the existence of problems or difficulties. In order to ensure a purely descriptive analysis, individual categories of problems were developed as they emerged from the RVR data. The combined transcripts of the interviews and RVRs were coded using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti (version 4.2, 1999). Transcripts for three learners (approximately 10% of the data) were coded by an independent coder familiar with the verbal report technique. The co-coder coded the transcripts segmented by the researcher using a provisional coding scheme. The two coders achieved 87.4% of agreement on average. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion.

## **7. Results**

### **7.1 Quantitative results**

Due to space limitations, only the results concerning particularly serious pragmatic problems that have emerged from the NS's General RVRs are presented. A total of 68 instances were identified (see Table 1), across more than 80% of the learners ( $n=26$ ) (mean frequency: 2.13; sd: 1.64). The top three causes of problems were (especially long, silent) pauses, inappropriate prosody (e.g. flat intonation) and inappropriate body language (e.g. lack of eye contact). These together accounted for nearly 80% of the instances. Under-elaboration and use of L1 were also occasionally commented on. Only one instance was related to inappropriate register.