[研究ノート]

A Study on how Japanese University Students Create English Statements of Disagreement

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Abstract

This study aims to identify how Japanese learners of English express disagreement using the asynchronous video software Flip. The present study is a pilot study for future joint research between two universities. The purpose of this research is to identify: 1) what topics stimulate students' desire to express themselves; 2) types of disagreements, and 3) linguistic features within disagreements. To achieve this aim, the authors invited 19 university students to participate in a discussion topic selection survey and upload two self-generated videos to Flip: 1) opinion on a topic and, 2) disagreement replying to a peer's opinion video. Three discussion topics were suggested but contrary to survey results, participants showed a clear avoidance of Japanese culture as a video topic. The second disagreement videos were analyzed referring to Rees-Miller (2000) and Scott (2002). The softened disagreement type was identified the most often, but for participants with a TOEIC score of less than 600 points, there was no significant correlation between disagreement types and TOEIC level. Results for linguistic features showed that modals, negation, and emphatics were the most commonly identified linguistic items.

1. Research Background

(1) The role of disagreement in language learning and communication.

In the language classroom, teachers encourage learners to express their opinions by designing activities that encourage discussion and debate. When it comes to showing opposing opinions, useful expressions can be found in the curriculum starting from junior high school. (The Course of Study, 2017, pp.79) This means that it is considered necessary to acquire linguistic knowledge and ability in this aspect. However, research has also pointed out that producing negative responses is a "sensitive" and "delicate" action because

it can lead to "face-threatening" consequences, and thus challenge interpersonal relations. (Hellermann, 2009; Endo, 2022; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Wierzbicka,1991) During social interaction where voicing conflicting opinions cannot be avoided, grammatical errors by learners are usually understandable. However, pragmatic mistakes when making disagreements are more difficult for listeners to accept as errors, as learners may accidentally create highly emotional or judgemental statements. Therefore, it is considered imperative to prepare learners for this challenge starting with classroom instruction and interaction.

(2) The use of student-generated videos in learning.

Japanese learners of English have been found to seldom express statements of disagreement in classrooms. In Japan, which is a confrontation-avoidant society, disagreeing with someone's opinion is strongly connected to the disapproval of that person. (Meyer, 2016) This can be one of the factors that prevent Japanese learners of English from expressing their honest opinions and ideas when speaking English. Attempts to motivate learners to overcome the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of the Japanese language in various way include encouraging words and creating statements of disagreement for the students to use. However, these efforts appeared to show little obvious improvement. A study provided insight that asynchronous student-generated Flip videos can facilitate student learning in such a manner (Guffery et al., 2022). Flip is an online social space for student expression in private groups. One of the most favorable features is its user friendly asynchronous style format. To counter the "confrontation-avoidant" challenge posed by Japanese culture, Flip videos were used due to the cushioning effect of asynchronous interaction.

(3) Research significance

In the field of disagreement research, there are already many notable contributions including sections of disagreements (Pomerantz, 1984), differences in disagreement types (Schiffrin, 1984, 1985, 1987), and linguistic features within disagreements (Wilce, 1995). Walkinshaw (2009) examined the development of Japanese English learners' acquisition of disagreement strategies during their stay in New Zealand. Endo (2022) examined the body language of three Japanese learners of English during a group work activity including conflicting opinions. However, it seems disagreement research focusing on Japanese learners of English at the university level is still rather limited. This study strives to offer three contributions: 1) motivating topics for student discussions; 2) different types of disagreement, and 3) linguistic features found in disagreements.

It must be noted here that this present study is a pilot study for future research between two universities in Japan. Therefore, identifying room for improvement is another aim of the paper.

2. Research Aim

Guffery et al. (2022) adopted asynchronous student-generated Flip videos to facilitate student learning. Data suggests that this approach was successful in a large enrollment, undergraduate physiology course. However, whether this can prove to be true for Japanese English learners expressing disagreement remains unknown. This pilot study will measure whether Flip videos can be used for disagreement teaching and answers the following three research questions.

Research question 1: What topics stimulate students' desire to express themselves?

Research question 2: What are the disagreement types within disagreements?

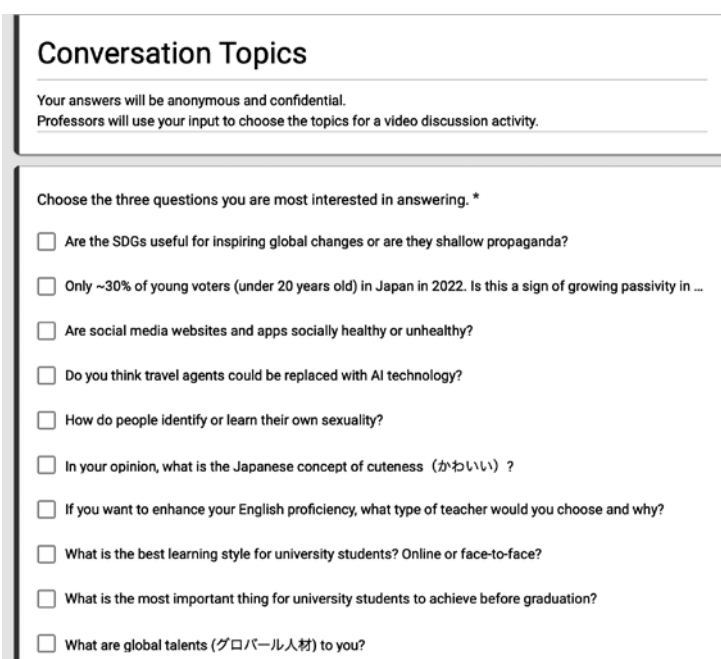Research question 3: What are the linguistic features within disagreements?

3. Methodology

(1) Participants

All participants were volunteers and were recruited from academic year 2023 spring semester classes and summer short-term study abroad programs through in-person announcements and digital communication. Students were offered extra credit or a reward of 1000 yen in return for participation in the video-making part of the research.

(2) Phase 1 – Survey

To find out what topics trigger participants' willingness to express themselves most, ten conversation topics were suggested in a survey. The topics were selected from controversial current issues and predicted interest and knowledge about university students. Participants

Conversation Topics

Your answers will be anonymous and confidential.
Professors will use your input to choose the topics for a video discussion activity.

Choose the three questions you are most interested in answering. *

☐ Are the SDGs useful for inspiring global changes or are they shallow propaganda?

☐ Only ~30% of young voters (under 20 years old) in Japan in 2022. Is this a sign of growing passivity in …

☐ Are social media websites and apps socially healthy or unhealthy?

☐ Do you think travel agents could be replaced with AI technology?

☐ How do people identify or learn their own sexuality?

☐ In your opinion, what is the Japanese concept of cuteness（かわいい）?

☐ If you want to enhance your English proficiency, what type of teacher would you choose and why?

☐ What is the best learning style for university students? Online or face-to-face?

☐ What is the most important thing for university students to achieve before graduation?

☐ What are global talents（グローバール人材）to you?

Figure 1. Suggested discussion topics as displayed on the Google Form

were directed to a Google Form and chose three topics that they were most interested in answering. (See Figure 1) The three most popular topics were then offered as discussion topics in the video-making part of the research. In total, 74 students responded to the survey. Results were generated directly from the Google Form.

(3) Phase 2 – Video Interaction

Students were offered extra credit or a monetary reward in return for participation in Phase 2. In total, there were 19 Japanese students (4 male students and 15 female students) as participants in Phase 2 (video-making) of this pilot study. (See Table 1)

Video shooting was further divided into two phases. In each phase, participants were asked to shoot one video. Phase 1 was expressing opinions on a chosen topic. Participants chose one topic from a shortlist based on survey findings, wrote scripts, and finally shot a video. Participants uploaded the video on Flip in a secure, private group titled "Opinion Sharing" and then edited closed captions for accuracy.

Phase 2 was the selection of a peer participant's video and the expression of disagreement in a second video. Participants watched other participants' videos until they found one they most disagreed with. Then they proceeded to create statements of disagreement and shoot and upload another video, editing closed captions for accuracy. They uploaded their video as a response to the video they chose to disagree with. Figure 2 shows a screenshot

Table 1. Participants information

| Participants	Gender	English level (TOEIC L & R test)
Participant 1	Male	500-point range
Participant 2	Male	200-point range
Participant 3	Male	380
Participant 4	Female	400-point range
Participant 5	Female	400-point range
Participant 6	Female	400-point range
Participant 7	Female	500-point range
Participant 8	Female	320
Participant 9	Female	470
Participant 10	Female	430
Participant 11	Female	380
Participant 12	Female	530
Participant 13	Female	550
Participant 14	Female	563
Participant 15	Female	675
Participant 16	Female	400-point range
Participant 17	Male	630
Participant 18	Female	580
Participant 19	Female	600-point range
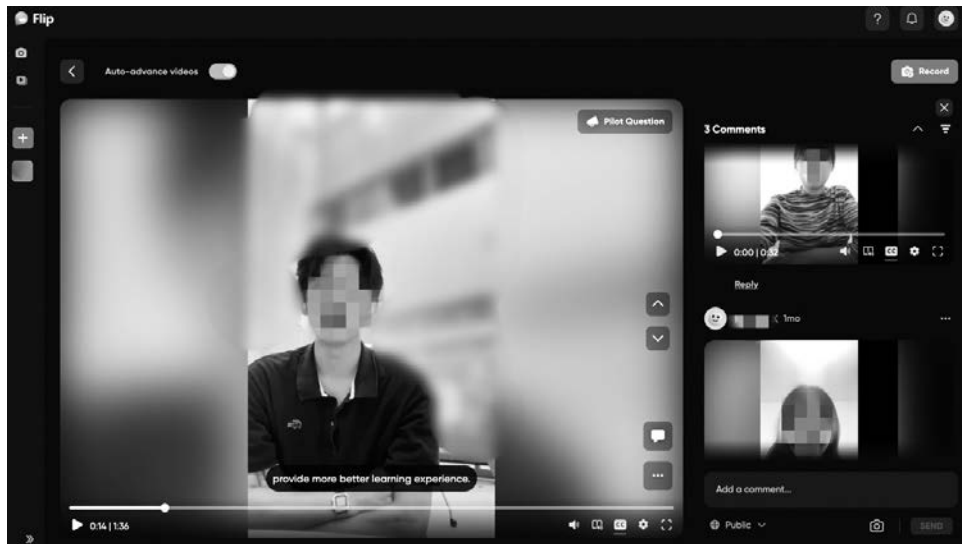
Figure 2. A sample webpage of disagreement videos

of the webpage where participants posted their disagreement videos as comments for a peer participant's opinion. The largest image on the left shows a participant expressing an opinion on why the best learning style is face-to-face. When the video plays, closed captions automatically appear. The two smaller images on the right display videos of other participants' disagreeing with the opinion in their own way.

The second videos produced by participants were analyzed from two aspects: disagreement types and linguistic features. In terms of disagreement types, authors examined videos mainly based on "type of disagreement" by Rees-Miller (2000). (See Figure 3) This "type of disagreement" was adopted for examining university students and the three categories were broader than labels such as "explicit" or "implicit". 14 out of 18
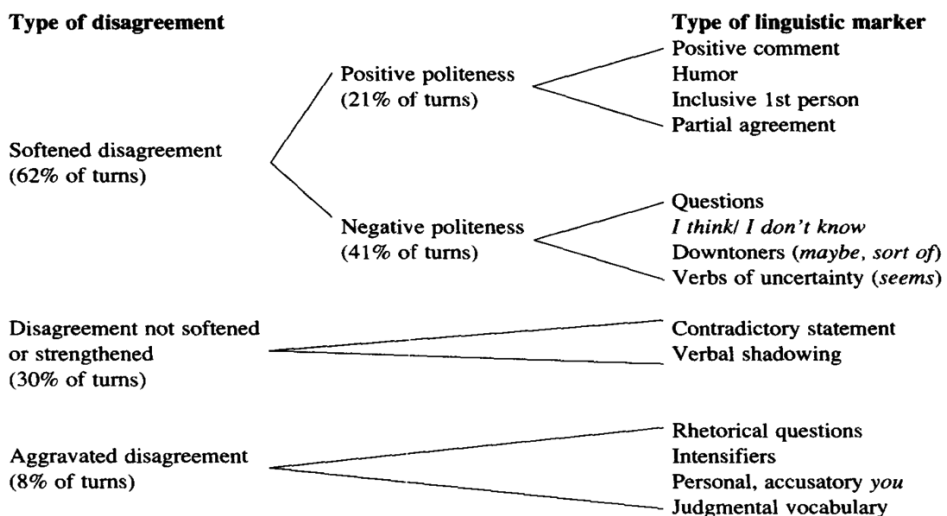

Figure 3. Taxonomy of disagreement by Rees-Miller (2000)

Table 2. A modified version of linguistic features by Scott (2002)

Absolutes	Negation		Emphatics	Indexical 2nd-person pronouns	Modals	Repetition	Questions
	affixal	nonaffixal					
all	*anti-*	*no*	*a lot*	*you*	possibility:	lexical	interrogatives
anybody	*de-*	*not*	*at all*	*your*	*can*	phrasal	with S-V
anyone	*dis-*	*n't*	*for sure*	*yourself*	*could*	clausal	inversion
anything	*il-*		*just*	*yourselves*	*may*	sentential	and/or, *wh-*
anywhere	*in-*		*more*		*might*		markers
ever	*ir-*		*most*		necessity:		
every	*-less*		*real+*		*must*		
everybody	*mis-*		adjective		*ought*		
everyone	*non-*		*really*		*should*		
everything	*un-*		*so+*		prediction:		
everywhere			adjective		*shall*		
never			*so*+adverb		*will*		
nobody			*such a*		*would*		
no one					*'ll*		
none					*'d*		
nothing					semi-modals:		
nowhere					*going to*		
					has to		
					have to		
					has got to		
					have got to		
					and ontractions		

participants used the word "disagree" or its paraphrase in the video. Therefore, "disagree" and its paraphrases were treated as linguistic markers named contradictory statements by Rees-Miller (2000). In the disagreement videos with additional linguistic markers, they were recategorized accordingly.

Rees-Miller (2000) and Scott (2002) were used as references to identify linguistic features. Scott (2002) was considered a suitable reference because the features included linguistic strategies, grammatical categories, and lexical items. Additionally, Walkinshaw (2009) referred to Scott's (2002) linguistic features to study Japanese learners of English. (See Table 2) Rees-Miller (2000) provided examples for each type of linguistic marker, and further supplemented Scott (2002). (See Figure 3) In the process of data analysis, two overlapping items were identified: "verbal shadowing" with "repetition" and "personal, accusatory you" with "indexical 2nd-person pronouns". The authors omitted "verbal shadowing" and "personal, accusatory you" because the remaining two items covered a wider range.

4. Findings
(1) Topics

Among the ten topic suggestions in the survey section, participants chose three topics they were most interested in. (See Figure 4)

The three most popular topics chosen are listed as follows:

Topic 1: Are social media apps and websites socially healthy or unhealthy?

Topic 2: In your opinion, what is the Japanese concept of cuteness (かわいい)?

Topic 3: What is the best learning style for university students? Online or face-to-face?

It can be seen from the results that the topic of social media ranked first place with 10 participants showing interest. The topic that came in a close second was the topic of *kawaii* (9 students). In third place was a topic concerning the learning styles chosen by 7 students. It must be noted that the topic in fourth place (What is the most important thing for university student to achieve before graduating) was only one person fewer than the third most popular topic.

However, from these topic choices the video topic distribution was uneven. Figure 5 demonstrates a comparison of the topics for each video. Learning styles, the 3rd most popular surveyed topic was the most popular opinion video topic (13 videos), while the 1st and 2nd most popular survey topics had much fewer contributions, 4 opinion videos for social media, and only 2 opinion videos for *kawaii*. Only two participants chose to express their disagreement on the concept of *kawaii*; participants were more willing to respond to topics on social media (9 video responses) and learning styles (7 video responses).
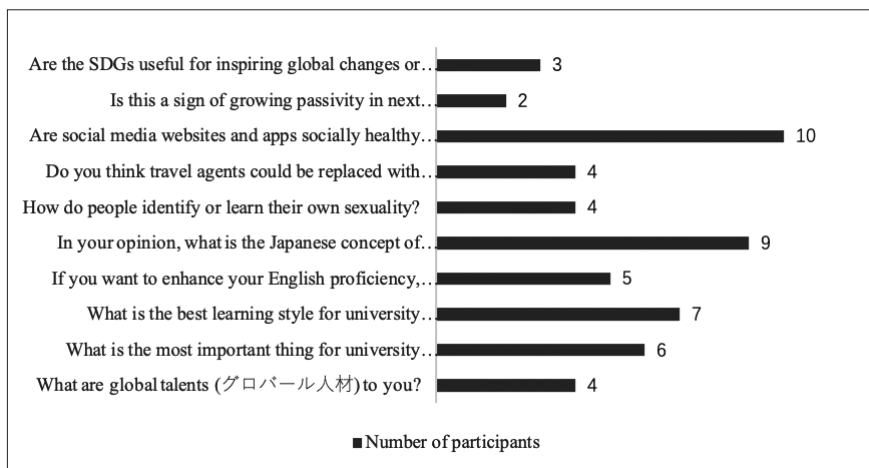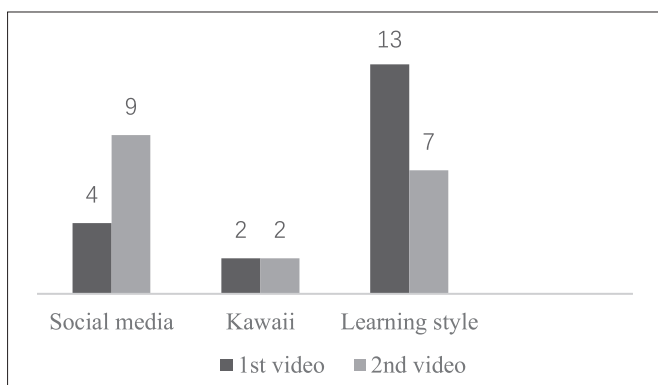
Figure 4. Discussion topic survey

Figure 5. A comparison of the choice of topics

Table 3. A comparison of disagreement types

Disagreement types	Videos in total			Topics	Videos
softened disagreement	10	positive politeness	6	Social media	3
				Kawaii	0
				Learning style	3
		negative politeness	4	Social media	1
				Kawaii	2
				Learning style	1
Disagreement not softened or strengthened	6			Social media	3
				Kawaii	0
				Learning style	3
aggravated disagreement	2			Social media	0
				Kawaii	0
				Learning style	2

(2) Disagreement types

18 disagreement videos were uploaded on Flip as a response to the opinion videos.[1] As can be seen from the TOEIC scores of the participants (Table 1), their scores mainly fall on 400–600 points (11 participants). Participants belonging to this cluster of scores or below were expected to produce mainly "not softened or strengthened" disagreements. Few "aggravated" disagreements were expected and the three participants whose scores were higher than 600 points were expected to create softened disagreements.

Results in Table 3 showed that among 18 videos, 10 belonged to the softened disagreement category, six disagreements not softened or strengthened, and two aggravated disagreements. (See Table 5 and Table 6) The fact that as many as five participants of the 400–600 cluster and two below 400 points disagreed weakly was not anticipated. In addition, the two aggravated disagreements appear to be significant outliers. Participant 7 (500-point range) and Participant 9 (470 points) chose to refute in a strong manner. The four participants below 400 points provided responses from the other two categories. It seemed that in this pilot study, under 600 points, disagreement types were not related to language proficiency.

(3) Linguistic features

Based on TOEIC scores, participants were hypothesized likely to use the linguistic features of repetition, "I think", and negation when voicing disagreements. A list of 10 linguistic features was made for analysis. Using Scott (2002), supplemented by Rees-Miller (2000). Only nine of the ten were listed because none of the disagreements included "Questions". (See Table 4) In terms of frequencies and videos, modals came first. This feature was closely followed by negation. Emphatics ranked third place. Emphatics were not predicted to occur frequently because they indicated strong messages.

Results of softened disagreement are presented from two sub-categories: positive

Table 4. A comparison of linguistic features

Linguistic features	Videos	Freq	Disagreement type	Freq	Topics	Freq
Absolutes	6	6	softened	4	Social media	1
			not softened or strengthened	1	Kawaii	1
			aggravated	1	Learning style	4
Negation	14	32	softened	7	Social media	6
			not softened or strengthened	5	Kawaii	2
			aggravated	2	Learning style	6
Emphatics	10	19	softened	4	Social media	2
			not softened or strengthened	4	Kawaii	1
			aggravated	2	Learning style	7
Indexical 2nd person pronouns	4	15	softened	1	Social media	2
			not softened or strengthened	1	Kawaii	0
			aggravated	2	Learning style	2
Modals	15	37	softened	8	Social media	6
			not softened or strengthened	5	Kawaii	0
			aggravated	2	Learning style	9
Repetition	7	9	softened	3	Social media	3
			not softened or strengthened	3	Kawaii	1
			aggravated	1	Learning style	3
Inclusive 1st person pronouns	6	11	softened	6	Social media	3
			not softened or strengthened	0	Kawaii	0
			aggravated	0	Learning style	3
I think (I believe)	4	8	softened	4	Social media	1
			not softened or strengthened	0	Kawaii	2
			aggravated	0	Learning style	1
Partial agreement	2	2	softened	2	Social media	1
			not softened or strengthened	0	Kawaii	1
			aggravated	0	Learning style	0

politeness and negative politeness. The most significant feature of positive politeness is the use of modals. Six videos, with 14 times of Modals, were identified as using positive politeness. The frequencies and TOEIC scores had no apparent connection. Another feature worth mentioning was inclusive 1st person pronouns. In five out of six videos, ten times the pronoun "we" (sometimes "us" or "our") occurred. Participant 11 (380 points) used "we" as many as four times. Finally, two videos with the feature of partial agreement were

identified. As can be seen from the two examples[2] below, both participants used "but" to create weak disagreements.

Participant 17: "I certainly have feelings of cuteness for animals and babies, but not for male idols."

Participant 12: "Serious problems can be caused, but we can do something to prevent them."

Participants who demonstrated negative politeness had TOEIC scores higher than 400 points. The most salient feature of negative politeness was the use of "I think". "I think" reappeared twice in each of the four videos regardless of participants' TOEIC scores. There were four linguistic markers (Figure 3) for this sub-category. However, the rest of the three items (questions, downtoners, verbs of uncertainty) were not found. None of the participants with TOEIC scores higher than 600 points used these three linguistic features.

Among four types of linguistic markers for aggravated disagreement, results revealed the only occurrence of the 2nd person pronoun "you" (or your/yourself) in the two videos as many as 12 times. Participant 7(500-point range) mentioned "you" seven times and Participant 9 (470 points) five times. There was no rising tone, staring at the camera or highlighting in both videos.

5. Discussion

In this section, the authors will explore reasons behind findings from three aspects: the choice of the discussion topic *kawaii*, disagreement types, and linguistic features.

Results for choice of video topics showed that *kawaii* was the least chosen topic for both the first video and the second one, despite being the second most popular topic in the survey. Even though the idea of *kawaii* seemed to be widely interesting, explaining the concept of *kawaii* could be more challenging than the other two topics as it requires meta-linguistic analysis and critical thinking about cultural ideas and values. The way the topic was suggested could also serve as a factor. Other topics (social media health and teaching styles) were presented in an "A or B?" pattern while "what is the concept of *kawaii*" is a more open question. Students may tend to be more responsive to the "A or B?" pattern.

Five participants of the 400-600 TOEIC score cluster and two below 400 points submitted softened disagreements. In the classroom, Japanese learners tend to avoid sharing conflicting opinions because it is considered best left unspoken. Facing the camera instead of their peers in person may have enabled them to feel more secure. Thinking about how their disagreements would be viewed by peers, participants may have realized the necessity of communicative strategies. The most common strategies were "I think" and inclusive first person pronouns.

However, at the risk of being impolite, two participants chose to refute their peer participants in a strong manner. They might be unaware that "you" had personal and

accusatory effects within disagreements. For Japanese learners, one of the most common topics is asking for directions. Below is a part of a dialogue between a tourist and a student from a high school textbook.

> Tourist: How can I get there, then?
> Nana: You can take a bus.
>
> Earthrise English Logic and Expression I Standard (2021, pp.28)

Unlike in a disagreement, "you" does not have a personal and accusatory effect when asking or giving directions. This possible error of pragmatic knowledge by two participants serves as a reminder when teaching respectful disagreement to clearly identify the invisible boundaries of politeness.

The linguistic feature of "modals" ranked first and occurred as many as 37 times. Modals add a dimension of indirectness that further de-emphasizes the strength of a statement. By giving room for doubt in the statement, it avoids direct conflict and maintains the possibility of multiple opinions being equally "correct" or "valid". Participants may favor modals to reduce the strength of utterances without noticing their effects.

Repetition was expected to be one of the top three linguistic features. Participants' scripts revealed that four participants simply "disagree with that opinion". They made use of pronouns as a strategy to reduce the cognitive load of creating utterances. Japanese learners usually find it very challenging to make a summary. If they repeat, they may feel the need for a copy of a long phrase or even a clause. Some participants even provided counterexamples without mentioning their peer participants' opinions.

Emphatics and absolutes are strong, conflicting language. However, emphatics reached the third place in the ranking appearing 14 times, often in the form of comparative adjectives. Comparative adjectives were taught in junior high schools, and were repeated in senior high school curriculums. It seems that emphatics, especially comparative adjectives may be more familiar to Japanese learners, and they were easily used to justify and support their opinions.

Results indicated that four linguistic features (questions, downtoner, verbs of uncertainty, and partial agreement) were rarely found. This suggests that even participants from the 600 TOEIC point cluster could lack pragmatic knowledge of them or these features may be obstacles learners face that instructors are not aware of.

6. Conclusion

This pilot study was conducted as an attempt to create an environment for Japanese learners to disagree openly. It seemed that learners accepted such an arrangement because they could avoid direct confrontation while successfully creating statements of disagreement.

However, an unexpected event occurred during a disagreement video shooting.

Participant 16, spent an unusual amount of time generating ideas for disagreement. To improve efficiency and reduce psychological stress, an idea bank for each topic was created as an assist. Materials that facilitate brainstorming may enhance the creation of disagreement videos in future studies.

A well-developed checklist for monitoring the quality of videos proved to be necessary for student-generated videos during data collection. Some participants needed guidance in comprehending peer participants' reasons. Some shot videos without looking at the camera. There were also videos with poor lighting.

In terms of privacy considerations, participants were unable to download, and were instructed not to record, or share peer participants' videos or audio in any form. Participants maintained anonymity by using self-selected nicknames when creating videos.

Notes:

1) Due to personal issues, one participant failed to shoot a disagreement video. Therefore, the disagreement videos for the pilot study were 18.

2) The examples are edited versions because of grammatical errors in the original scripts.

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Appendix A

Table 5. Disagreement type and linguistic features of 18 participants (Page 1)

Participant	Topic	Disagreement type	Linguistic features
1	social media	not softened or strengthened	Repetition (phrasal: get young people involved in crime) Negation (affixal disagree/nonaffixal: not X2) Modals (semi-modal: have to/possibility: can) Emphatic (highly convenient)
2	learning style	not softened or strengthened	Absolute (anywhere) Negation (affixal disagree) Emphatic (only, better X2, more) Modals (possibility: can X2)
3	learning style	softened disagreement: positive politeness	Absolute (anytime) Modals (possibility: can X3) Repetition (verbal: pronunciation; phrasal: mouth movement; clausal: who... speak, who... be the moderator)
4	social media	softened disagreement: negative politeness	I think.../ I believe...; Emphatic(richer) Modal (possibility: may)
5	social media	not softened or strengthened	Negation (not X2; without)
6	kawaii	softened disagreement: negative politeness	I think X2 Negation (affixal: disagree X2) Emphatic (more X2)
7	learning style	aggravated disagreement	Indexical 2nd-person pronouns (you X6; your) Absolute (always) Negation (nonaffixal: without; not) Emphatic (only; less nervous) Modals (possibility: can X5; semi-modal: need to)
8	social media	not softened or strengthened	Indexical 2nd-person pronouns(you) Repetition(clausal) Negation (affixal disagree X2) Modals (possibility: can; prediction: will)
9	learning style	aggravated disagreement	Indexical 2nd-person pronouns (you X4; your) Repetition(phrasal) Modals (possibility: can X3; semi-modal: need to) Negation (nonaffixal: not) Emphatic (more effective)

Appendix B

Table 6. Disagreement type and linguistic features of 18 participants (Page 2)

Participant	Topic	Disagreement type	Linguistic features
10	social media	softened disagreement: positive politeness	Indexical 2nd-person pronouns (your/yourself) Inclusive 1st person pronoun (we; our) Negation (affixal disagree; nonaffixal not) Modals (possibility: can/ be able to)
11	social media	softened disagreement: positive politeness	Inclusive 1st person pronoun (we X2 us; our) Negation (affixal disagree; nonaffixal not X3) Modal (possibility: can)
12	social media	softened disagreement: positive politeness	Inclusive 1st person pronoun (we X2) Partial agreement (serious problem can…, but …) Absolute (always) Negation (affixal disagree; nonaffixal not) Modal (possibility: can X2; necessity: should) Repetition(clausal)
13	learning style	not softened or strengthened	Negation (affixal: disagree/disagreement; nonaffixal: not X3) Modals (possibility: can X2) Emphatic (better)
14	learning style	softened disagreement: positive politeness	Inclusive 1st person pronoun (we) Modals (possibility: can X3; prediction: will)
15	learning style	softened disagreement: positive politeness	Inclusive 1st person pronoun (we) Negation (nonaffixal: not) Emphatic (more X3) Modal (necessity: should)
16	learning style	not softened or strengthened	Contradictory statement (face to face classes provide better learning experience vs. I have good experiences that I shared my thoughts with many classmates in online classes and learn more each other.) Emphatic (the best; more) Modal (possibility: can) repetition (lexical)
17	kawaii	softened disagreement: negative politeness	I think X2 Absolute (certainly) Negation (nonaffixal not X2) Repetition (lexical: animals)
19	learning style	softened disagreement: negative politeness	I think X2 Absolute (wherever) Negation (nonaffixal not; no) Emphatic (the best; more) Modals (possibility: can X2; semi-modal: have to)

Keywords: Disagreement, Flip, Student-generated Videos

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