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Measuring the Behavioral Dimension of Intercultural Communicative Competence among Study Abroad Students: Insights from Japanese Speech Style Shifting

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Abstract

Measuring study-abroad (SA) students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been a challenging task. Simply comparing pre- and post-SA language proficiency test results may not capture the full extent of ICC development. This study explores the behavioral dimension of ICC among SA students by examining changes in Japanese speech style shifting, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of ICC development. The mixed-methods analysis revealed that participants shifted their speech style more actively in post-SA interviews than in pre-SA interviews. Qualitative analysis further indicated that participants' style shifting in post-SA interviews helped them appear more approachable while maintaining an appropriate level of formality and politeness, which suggests growth in ICC. These findings emphasize the broader applicability of examining speech style-shifting across languages as a measure of the behavioral dimension of ICC in SA programs. The study also discusses pedagogical implications and offers directions for future research on measuring ICC in SA contexts.

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Abstract in Japanese

留学 (SA) 学生の異文化コミュニケーション能力 (ICC) の測定は困難な課題である。単に留学前後の言語能力テストの結果を比較するだけでは、ICC の発達を十分に捉えきれない可能性がある。本研究は、アメリカ人留学生の日本語におけるスピーチ・スタイル・シフティング (speech style shifting) の留学前後の変化に着目して、ICC の行動的側面の発達をより詳しく把握することを目的とする。分析の結果、参加者は留学前のインタビューよりも留学後のインタビューでスタイルをより積極的に切り替えていた。さらに質的分析では、留学後のインタビューにおけるスタイル・シフトは、適切なフォーマリティと丁寧さを維持しつつも親しみやすさを高め、ICC の行動的側面の成長を示唆した。これらの結果は、他言語においてもスピーチ・スタイル・シフティングが、留学生の ICC 発達を行動面から測る指標として有用の可能性を示す。最後に、本研究は教育的示唆を提示し、留学における ICC 測定の今後の研究課題を提案する。

Keywords

Assessment; intercultural communicative competence; Japanese speech style shifting; study abroad learning

1. Introduction

As globalization expands, intercultural competence has become a central goal for many higher education institutions in the United States, and study-abroad (SA) programs are widely recognized as valuable tools for fostering students' intercultural competence (Taguchi & Collentine, 2018). Researchers have also reported empirical evidence of the benefits of SA programs for intercultural competence development. For example, Van Berg et al. (2009) found that SA participants made significant gains compared to students in the control group. Furthermore, higher intercultural sensitivity appears to benefit target language (TL) development during SA programs. Baker-Smemoe et al. (2014) reported that SA students with higher intercultural sensitivity before departure demonstrated greater gains in L2 proficiency than those who scored lower on an intercultural sensitivity questionnaire, indicating a close relationship between intercultural sensitivity and TL gains in SA contexts.

The definition of intercultural competence varies among scholars and across academic fields (Deardorff & Jones, 2012). In foreign language education and applied linguistics, the term intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which emphasizes learners' TL use, is often used interchangeably with

intercultural competence (Barili & Byram, 2021; Fantini, 2019). ICC refers to the ability to communicate and interact effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This includes understanding cultural differences, demonstrating sensitivity to cultural norms and values, and adapting communication strategies appropriately in intercultural contexts using a TL (Byram, 1997; Byram & Wagner, 2018).

Although scholars have not reached consensus on a single definition of ICC or its components, three dimensions commonly appear: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Bennett, 2009; Chen & Starosta, 1996; Dearsdorff, 2006; Perry & Southwell, 2011). The cognitive dimension involves students' comprehension of the target culture and their recognition of differences between their own and other cultures (Hill, 2006). The affective dimension reflects an individual's active desire to understand, appreciate, and accept cultural differences. It includes participation in communication, confidence in intercultural interactions, acknowledgment and respect for cultural disparities, enjoyment in communication, and attentiveness in communicative situations (Chen & Starosta, 1996). The behavioral dimension encompasses respect, interaction management, and tolerance of ambiguity (Koester & Olsbe, 1988), as well as cross-cultural adaptability (Kelley & Meyers, 1995). In foreign language education, which focuses on communication in a TL, behavioral aspects of ICC—such as knowing how to act appropriately in the TL—are often among the primary goals (Walker & Noda, 2010).

However, previous studies on SA students' ICC have primarily measured students' knowledge and attitudes through questionnaires (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014; Van Berg et al., 2009). It is therefore critical to investigate the behavioral dimension of ICC, which reflects SA students' capacity to use the target language effectively to bridge cultural differences (Tran & Duong, 2018) and their ability to shape interactions and relationships in ways that are mutually beneficial (Jian, 2021).

The linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge and skills crucial for foreign language learners to communicate effectively and appropriately may vary depending on their native language (L1) and culture (C1) as well as the TL and target culture (TC). Previous research on American SA learners in Japan suggests that the ability to shift speech style effectively and appropriately is crucial for building close relationships with locals (Iwasaki, 2011; Taguchi, 2015; Tobaru, 2019). Therefore, this ability is considered an essential component of ICC for SA students in Japan.

In Japanese, there are two main speech styles: plain forms and *desu/masu* forms (hereafter *masu* forms). Plain forms typically predominate in casual conversations between individuals whose relationship is personal and intimate, in contexts that do not require formality. *Masu* forms, on the other hand, signal that the speaker is showing “solicitude toward, and maintaining some linguistic distance from the addressee” (Jordan & Noda, 1987, p. 32), particularly in spoken communication. Unlike English, Japanese has no socially neutral predicate form for ending a full sentence; a speaker must choose between plain form and *masu* form depending on the context. For example, the English sentence Mr. Tanaka eats a cake can be expressed using either *masu*-form or plain-form endings:

Tanaka-san ga keeki o tabe-masu. [Mr. Tanaka eats a cake.]

(Mr. Tanaka, SUB, cake, OBJ, eat [masu form])

Tanaka-san ga keeki o taberu. [Mr. Tanaka eats a cake.]

(Mr. Tanaka, SUB, cake, OBJ, eat [plain form])

Both sentences are structurally equivalent—subject (Mr. Tanaka), object (cake), and verb placement—but differ in verb form. While the English translations are identical, the social meanings indexed by the two forms differ. For instance, *Tanaka-san ga keeki o taberu* (a plain-form ending) might be said to a friend or family member, whereas *Tanaka-san ga keeki o tabe-masu* (a *masu*-form ending) would likely be addressed to a superior or business partner to convey respect or maintain social distance.

Masuda’s (2010) study revealed that foreign language learners with SA experience shifted speech styles more appropriately within conversations than those without SA experience, suggesting that SA contexts in Japan provide more opportunities to observe and practice speech styles than domestic learning environments. For this reason, examining the development of SA students’ style-shifting abilities serves as an effective means of measuring the behavioral dimension of ICC in the Japanese SA context.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that examining Japanese speech style shifting is an effective method for measuring the behavioral dimension of ICC among SA students in Japan, reflecting linguistic and cultural skills relevant to today’s global society. To achieve this aim, the study analyzes seven SA students’ Japanese speech style shifting before and after an academic year in Japan, framed within the concept of ICC.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews research on ICC and its measurement in several contexts, including study-abroad (SA) settings. It also examines Japanese speech styles and explains why analyzing speech style shifting is a suitable method for measuring SA students' ICC development in Japan.

2.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence and Measurement in SA Contexts

In the field of foreign language education, Michael Byram (1997, 2008, 2018) developed a theoretical framework for ICC that emphasizes communication skills, such as knowing how to interact with individuals who hold different ways of thinking, believing, and behaving across cultures (Byram, 2009). Byram's framework connects ICC with the concept of communicative competence (CC), originally proposed by Hymes (1964) and later applied to second and foreign language education in the 1990s (Byram, 2012). Communicative competence refers to the ability to use grammatical knowledge to communicate appropriately in various contexts, often modeled on native speaker norms. This knowledge is generally referred to as pragmatic or sociocultural knowledge.

Pragmatic competence includes the ability to perform language functions and to use language in socially appropriate ways (Taguchi, 2009). Within the communicative competence model (Hymes, 1964), this competence involves context-specific appropriateness and an understanding of speech acts, politeness strategies, and conversational implicature, typically situated within a single cultural framework. However, researchers argue that relying solely on first-language (L1) norms for pragmatic competence may not align with ICC in a globalized context (Byram, 2012; Jian, 2021; Zeng, 2018). For example, SA students' struggles with appropriate language use do not always arise from insufficient pragmatic knowledge but often from identity-related challenges (Isabelli-García, 2006; Siegal, 1995; Tobaru, 2025; Wilkinson, 1998). Byram (2012) further cautions that aiming exclusively for CC in foreign language education can be misleading, as it implies that learners should emulate native speakers while disregarding their own social identities and cultural competence.

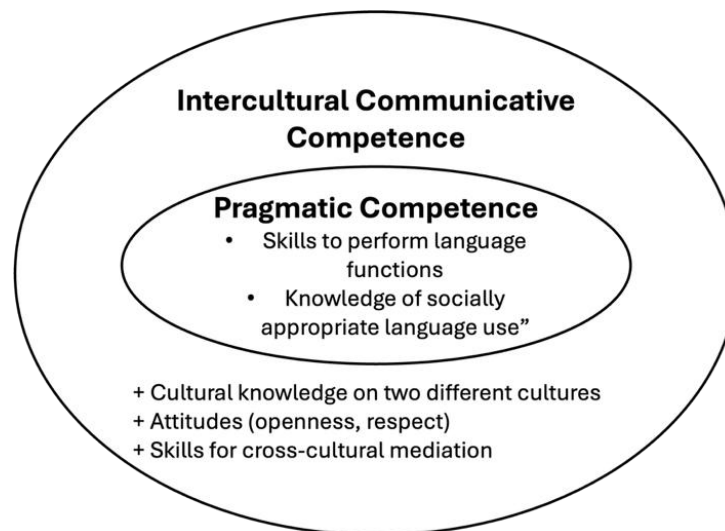
Building on the theoretical model of CC, Byram emphasizes the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across diverse cultural contexts. ICC thus requires cultural awareness, adaptability, and the ability to navigate

multiple languages and cultural frameworks (Byram, 2008). The broader goal of ICC is to foster understanding and respect while facilitating effective communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

As illustrated in Figure (1), ICC can be understood as extending beyond pragmatic competence, which is often rooted in L1 norms and rules, by incorporating knowledge of at least two cultural systems, attitudes of openness, and skills of mediation and adaptation. By distinguishing between these competencies, we can recognize the broader scope of ICC, which builds upon the foundation of pragmatic competence to bridge cultural differences and enhance intercultural interactions.

FIGURE (1)

ICC AND PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE



2.2. Style Shifting by Japanese L1 Speakers

This section reviews previous research on how native speakers of Japanese use speech style shifting between two types of sentence endings—masu forms and plain forms—to communicate effectively with interlocutors, co-construct meaning, and convey politeness as well as social or attitudinal distance.

As noted earlier, speakers of Japanese must choose either a plain or masu form to end their utterances, as the language lacks a neutral speech style. Plain forms are typically associated with informal or casual communication, while masu forms are often linked to politeness and formality. Research indicates, however, that native Japanese speakers often shift between these styles within a single conversation. This choice depends on multiple contextual factors,

including the speakers' gender, age, social status, relationship, time, place, and communicative purpose. Skills in speech style shifting are therefore essential for establishing and maintaining close relationships in Japanese.

Maynard (1993) emphasized the importance of addressee awareness in style shifts: *masu* forms tend to be used when the addressee is perceived as psychologically distant (e.g., a superior), whereas plain forms signal closeness (e.g., a friend). Cook (2008) further differentiated plain forms into two categories: the informal speech style (IfSS), which incorporates emotional markers such as sentence-final particles and rising intonation, and the detached speech style (DtSS), which conveys factual or neutral content without emotional nuance.

In addition to the two sentence-ending forms, Japanese speakers frequently employ incomplete endings, often referred to as incomplete sentences, such as those ending in *kedo* ("but") or *node/kara* ("because"). These endings typically imply meanings that are understood contextually or serve to soften the tone of the utterance (Itani, 1992; Ohori, 1996). Furthermore, plain-form endings are sometimes used in predominantly *masu*-form contexts for soliloquy-like expressions, such as exclamations or self-reflection, and for co-constructing ideas (Cook, 2008; Okamoto, 1999).

Overall, native speakers of Japanese employ style shifting to navigate social dynamics and interpersonal relationships, demonstrating acute sensitivity to context and addressee. This complexity makes speech style shifting a challenging yet essential skill for learners of Japanese as a foreign language, as explored in the next section.

2.3. Style Shifting by Japanese FL Speakers

Research indicates that even advanced learners of Japanese as a foreign language (FL) struggle with speech style shifting due to its complexity (Cook, 2016; Masuda, 2010; Okazaki, 2015; Taguchi, 2015). Comparative studies of native (L1) and non-native (L2/FL) speakers reveal that FL learners tend to overuse *masu*-form endings relative to L1 speakers (Masuda, 2010; Okazaki, 2015). Masuda (2010) found that L1 speakers frequently employed incomplete sentences, particularly in joint utterances, while reserving *masu* forms for situations requiring heightened addressee awareness, such as addressing professors or signaling acknowledgment.

Okazaki (2015) further reported that advanced L2 speakers often misused informal plain forms, including sentence-final particles and rising

intonation, which projected unintended informality in soliloquy-like expressions. This pattern highlights the difficulty of mastering the nuanced use of plain forms. Kasper and Rose (2002) observed that SA students generally adopted more informal styles during study abroad, with many decreasing their use of masu-form endings and overusing plain forms upon returning from Japan (Iwasaki, 2008; Marriott, 1995; Taguchi, 2015).

Taguchi (2015) noted that SA participants initially relied on plain forms with rising intonation to check comprehension, reflecting limited linguistic competence. After their SA experience, however, participants used rising intonation more appropriately, particularly in forming questions. Similarly, Cook (2016) and Iwasaki (2008) found that learners with lower pre-SA proficiency tended to overuse plain forms but nonetheless demonstrated some awareness of masu forms in deferential contexts. Collectively, these findings suggest that proficiency level significantly influences learners' ability to shift styles appropriately.

Although mastering speech style shifting is challenging for FL learners of Japanese, research shows that SA contexts can provide a more supportive learning environment (Masuda, 2010). Nevertheless, most studies on SA students and ICC have focused on cognitive and affective dimensions, often relying on questionnaires, leaving the behavioral dimension underexplored. This gap is particularly evident for learners of less commonly taught languages such as Japanese.

Moreover, researchers investigating the development of Japanese speech style shifting among FL learners frequently frame this ability as "pragmatic competence" (Cook, 2016; Iwasaki, 2008; Taguchi, 2015). As discussed earlier, however, the ICC framework offers a more comprehensive perspective, as it accounts for how SA students' ability to shift speech styles enables them to communicate appropriately, effectively, and strategically in building relationships across cultures.

Unlike previous approaches that prioritize cognitive and affective aspects, the present study examines how SA students adapt their speech styles to bridge cultural differences and foster interpersonal connections. This behavioral skill remains essential yet underexplored in the literature on ICC development. By investigating the nuanced practice of speech style shifting, this study contributes new insights into the real-world application of ICC, extending

its scope beyond theoretical constructs and offering practical implications for both language education and intercultural training programs.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were undergraduate students from a large public research university in the United States. Eight students initially agreed to participate after receiving detailed explanations of the study procedures; however, one was excluded due to a lack of submitted data. The final sample consisted of seven participants, all of whom were White, U.S.-born, and raised, with English as their L1 and primary language for daily communication. Table (1) below summarizes the participants (with pseudonyms), their completed Japanese language coursework at the home institution, prior experience in Japan, and unofficial Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) ratings before and after their SA sojourns. At the home institution, Japanese language students in levels 1 through 3 attended five 50-minute sessions per week.

TABLE (1)
BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Name	Japanese Course Completed before SA	Previous Experience in Japan	Unofficial OPI ratings		Length of Study abroad
			Pre-SA	Post-SA	
Anna	Level 3; six semesters (about 415 hours)	Four weeks for SA	NH ¹	NH	10 months
Bobby	Level 3; six semesters (about 415 hours)	Four weeks for SA	IL	IL	9 months
Cathy	Level 2; four semesters (about 275 hours)	0	IL	IM	10 months
Emma	Level 4; six semesters + two summer intensive courses (about 525 hours)	Nine months + 4 weeks for SA	IH	IH	10 months
Frank	Level 3; six semesters (about 415 hours)	Four weeks for SA	IM	IH	10 months
Henry	Level 5; eight semesters (about 610 hours)	0	IH	AL	10 months
Isabelle	Level 3; six semesters (about 415 hours)	Two weeks for traveling	IL	IM	10 months

¹Note. NH = Novice High; IL = Intermediate Low; IM = Intermediate Mid; AL = Advanced-low

Cathy, Frank, and Isabelle attended the same SA program, while the other participants enrolled in different programs. It is important to note that the characteristics of each program, as well as the interactional opportunities available for students to use Japanese, varied and may have influenced their speech style shifting development. Table (2) presents information about these universities.

TABLE (2)
INFORMATION OF FIVE HOST UNIVERSITIES IN JAPAN

Host Universities	Type of University	Region	Student Population		
			Undergraduate students	Graduate students	International students
University A	Liberal arts college	Kanto Region	2,780	230	300
University B	Private university	Kanto Region	39,470	5,950	1850
University C	National university	Hokkaidō Region	11,100	6340	1850
University D	Private university	Chūbu Region	9,800	210	250
University E	National university	Tōfoku Region	10,850	5,550	1,950

Cathy, Frank, and Isabelle attended University A, a four-year liberal arts college located in the Kanto region. At the time of the study, the university enrolled approximately 2,780 undergraduate, 230 graduate, and 300 international students. According to the host institution's website, the university has one of the most well-known programs for teaching Japanese to non-native speakers.

Bobby attended University B, a private research university and the largest institution in the current sample by student population. The university is also located in the Kanto region, which includes Tokyo and several surrounding prefectures. At the time of the study, it enrolled approximately 39,470 undergraduate, 5,950 graduate, and 4,800 international students. International exchange students take language courses at appropriate levels, as well as courses such as Japanese culture, Asian culture and society, Japanese politics, and economics, all taught in English. Students generally do not have access to regular courses taught in Japanese.

Anna attended University C, one of the major national universities, located in one of the five largest cities in northern Japan. The university's website indicates that approximately 11,100 undergraduate and 6,340 graduate students were enrolled, along with 1,850 international students from 67 countries. For international students, the university offers an English-only track that includes Japanese language, history, and culture. In addition, international students may take courses offered in Japanese for domestic students if they pass the school's language placement test.

Emma attended University D, a private university located in a city in the Chubu region in central Honshū. At the time of the study, the university enrolled approximately 9,800 undergraduate, 210 graduate, and 250 international students. In addition to multi-level Japanese language classes, participants in the SA program can attend courses in Japanese and Asian culture, politics, economics, society, and other disciplines taught in English.

Henry attended University E, a national university considered to be among the top universities in Japan. It is located in one of the largest cities in the Tohoku region, north of Tokyo, and enrolled approximately 10,850 undergraduate, 5,550 graduate, and 1,950 international students. In addition to Japanese language courses, international students can take courses in Japanese and Asian culture, politics, economics, society, religion, literature, and history, which are taught in English. General education courses for local students are also available to international students whose Japanese proficiency is sufficient. More detailed descriptions of the characteristics of the SA programs in Japan and the interactional opportunities they offered can be found in Tobaru (2023 & 2025).

3.2. Instruments: Japanese Interviews

The study employed Japanese interviews to collect data on SA students' style-shifting development. These interviews followed the format of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), which allowed me to assess participants' language proficiency gains and compare the findings with previous studies. The OPI is a one-on-one interview conducted in the target language to evaluate speaking ability. During the test, the interviewer elicits a range of tasks, from answering simple direct questions (e.g., What is your hobby?) to engaging in more complex tasks, such as stating and defending opinions on social issues or discussing hypothetical situations.

The ACTFL OPI proficiency scale includes five major levels: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior, and Distinguished. Speakers at the Novice-high to Intermediate-low levels can create original sentences rather than relying solely on memorized expressions, though they may still encounter difficulties in communication. Intermediate-level speakers generally have no trouble discussing topics related to themselves but may struggle with topics beyond their immediate interests. Advanced-level speakers are able to discuss complex issues by expressing and supporting opinions (ACTFL, 2012). One limitation of the OPI is that, due to the breadth of its proficiency bands, a student may demonstrate gains in proficiency after SA yet still receive the same rating as before SA (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014).

Prior to conducting the interviews, I attended two four-day OPI workshops hosted by ACTFL and subsequently conducted the Japanese interviews. To elicit abilities not easily captured in the OPI's conversational format (ACTFL, 2012), participants whose proficiency ranged from Novice-high to Superior also engaged in role-play tasks. However, because the appropriate speech style for these role-plays varied by participant, the data from these contexts were excluded from the analysis.

3.3. Procedures and Data Analysis

All audio recordings of the OPI tests were transcribed for both quantitative and qualitative analyses. For the quantitative analysis, participants' utterance-final forms were counted and examined. These forms were categorized as *masu* forms (including *'hai'*, a formal "yes"); plain forms (including *'un'*, an informal counterpart of *'hai'*); or incomplete sentences. In this study, incomplete sentences include suspended clauses, particle-ending utterances, and other truncated expressions (e.g., *chotto, daitai*). Utterance endings that indicated linguistic difficulty—such as switching to English or producing an incomplete sentence before an utterance like *setsumei dekimasen* [I cannot explain it (in Japanese)]—were excluded from the analysis.

For the qualitative analysis, all plain forms were further categorized as either informal speech style plain forms (IfSS-PFs) or detached speech style plain forms (DtSS-PFs). IfSS-PFs are often accompanied by affective keys and convey intimacy with the interlocutor by indexing the speaker's relaxed, informal stance. In contrast, DtSS-PFs are typically devoid of emotional marking and do not convey intimacy toward the interlocutor, as they are usually produced without affective keys (Cook, 2008). However, some DtSS-PFs—

particularly soliloquy-like utterances—may include plain forms with affective keys. For example, the phrase, *kinoo datta ka na* [I wonder if it was yesterday] contains multiple sentence-final particles (*ka na*) that signal self-reflection. In this study, DtSS-PFs are therefore defined as plain forms that indicate low addressee awareness (Maynard, 1993, p. 178).

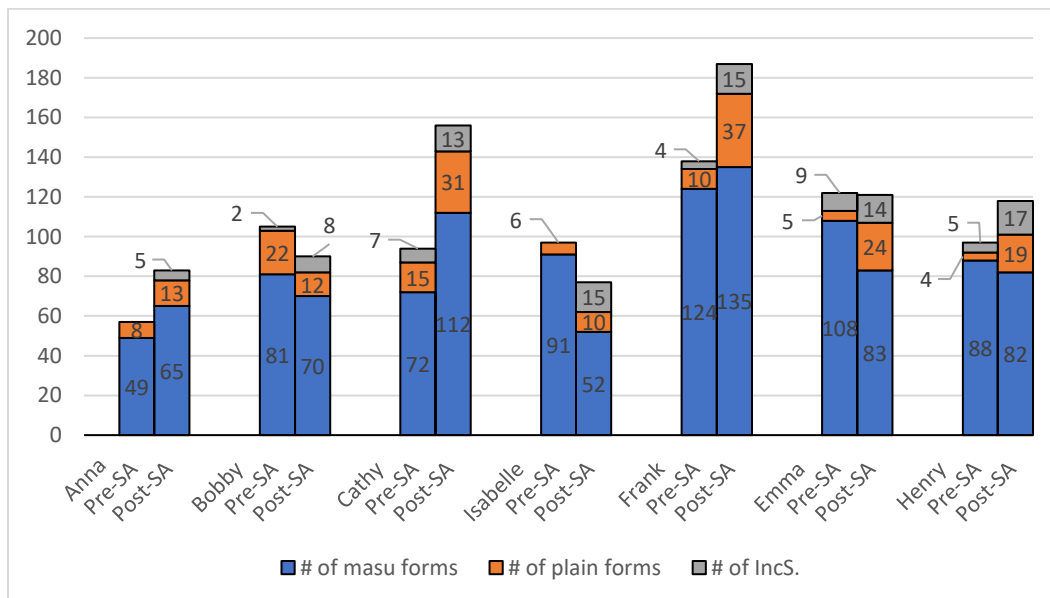
Additionally, plain forms used to co-construct ideas or provide background information are categorized as DtSS-PFs in this study. When a speaker employs DtSS-PFs, the focus tends to be on the content of the statement rather than the interpersonal relationship. Strategic use of DtSS-PFs can facilitate conversation without undermining relational dynamics, a skill that represents a crucial component of ICC. Following previous research, DtSS-PFs in this study are attributed four primary functions: (a) soliloquy-like utterances (e.g., recalling information and self-reflection), (b) exclamatory expressions, (c) expressions of affective intensity in narrative contexts, and (d) co-construction with an interlocutor..

4. Findings

4.1. Findings from Quantitative Analysis

This section presents the findings from the quantitative analysis. Chart 1 displays the total number of occurrences in each category: masu-form endings, plain-form endings, and incomplete sentences (IncSs).

FIGURE (2)
OCCURRENCES OF SMPs BY CATEGORIES



This section presents the findings from the quantitative analysis. Chart 1 displays the total number of occurrences in each category: masu-form endings, plain-form endings, and incomplete sentences (IncSs).

Although three participants—Bobby, Emma, and Isabelle—showed a decrease in the number of utterances post-SA, this did not necessarily mean they spoke less. For example, Isabelle produced longer and more complex clauses in the post-SA interviews than in the pre-SA interviews. In fact, she used 452 Japanese words in the pre-SA interviews and 902 words in the post-SA interviews, whereas Bobby and Emma showed only slight decreases in the number of words produced after SA. All participants predominantly used masu forms both before and after the SA programs in Japan; however, the extent of change varied substantially among participants.

Table (3) presents the delta percentage calculations for changes in speech style occurrences before and after study abroad. For Anna and Isabelle’s data, “N/A” in the table indicates that delta percentage calculation was not applicable due to division by zero in those categories.

TABLE (3)

DELTA PERCENTAGE CALCULATIONS FOR THE CHANGES IN SPEECH STYLE OCCURRENCES BEFORE AND AFTER STUDY ABROAD

Student	Pre % Masu	Pre % Plain	Pre % IncS	Post % Masu	Post % Plain	Post % IncS	Δ Masu (pp)	Δ Plain (pp)	Δ IncS (pp)
Anna	85.96	14.04	0.00	78.31	15.66	6.02	-7.65	+1.63	+6.02
Bobby	77.14	20.95	1.90	77.78	13.33	8.89	+0.63	-7.62	+6.98
Cathy	76.60	15.96	7.45	71.79	19.87	8.33	-4.80	+3.91	+0.89
Isabelle	93.81	6.19	0.00	67.53	12.99	19.48	-26.28	+6.80	+19.48
Frank	89.86	7.25	2.90	72.19	19.79	8.02	-17.66	+12.54	+5.12
Emma	88.52	4.1	7.38	68.6	19.83	11.57	-19.93	+15.74	+4.19
Henry	90.72	4.12	5.15	69.49	16.1	14.41	-21.23	+11.98	+9.25

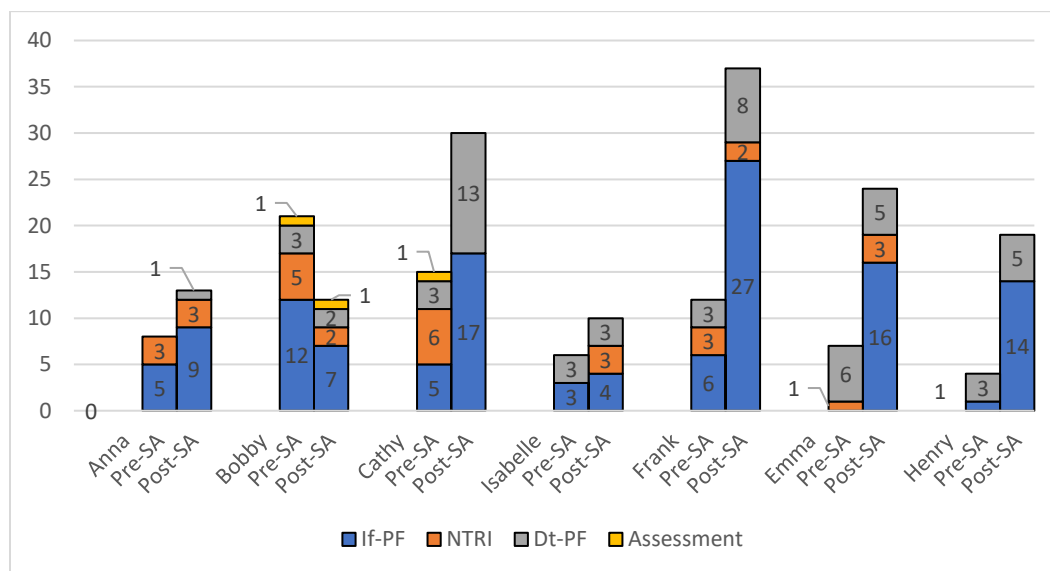
All participants except Bobby increased their use of plain-form endings in the post-SA interviews, while Bobby showed a slight increase in masu-form endings. Regarding plain forms, all participants other than Bobby increased their usage, with particularly notable gains observed for Frank, Emma, and Henry. In addition, all participants demonstrated increases in the use of incomplete sentences (labeled “IncS” in the table) during the post-SA interviews.

4.1.1. Changes in Functions of Plain Form Use

Figure (3) shows different functions of plain forms used in pre- and post-SA interviews.

FIGURE (3)

TYPES OF PLAIN FORMS IN PRE- AND POST-SA INTERVIEWS



Among the different functions of plain forms, next-turn repair initiatives (NTRIs) and assessments are unique to FL speakers of Japanese and can be regarded as direct results of limited Japanese language proficiency (Cook, 2016; Okazaki, 2015; Taguchi, 2015). Table (4) on the following page summarizes the delta percentages for changes in plain-form-ending occurrences before and after study abroad. Because there were relatively few instances of assessment-type plain forms, they were combined with NTRIs in the chart rather than calculated separately.

Overall, the use of NTRI and assessment plain forms decreased in the post-SA interviews for all participants except Isabelle. For informal plain forms (If-PFs), all participants except Isabelle showed increases. In contrast, for detached plain forms (Dt-PFs), Anna, Bobby, and Cathy increased, while Isabelle, Frank, Emma, and Henry decreased. A particularly notable decrease was observed in Emma's Dt-PF use, accompanied by increases in her If-PF use; these changes will be examined in greater detail in the section on qualitative findings.

TABLE (4)

DELTA PERCENTAGE CALCULATIONS FOR THE CHANGES IN TYPES OF PF OCCURRENCES BEFORE AND AFTER STUDY ABROAD

Student	Pre % If-PF	Pre % NTRI	Pre % Dt-PF	Post % If-PF	Post % NTRI	Post % Dt-PF	Δ If-PF (pp)	Δ NTRI (pp)	Δ Dt-PF (pp)
Anna	62.5	37.5	0.0	69.23	23.08	7.69	+6.73	-14.42	+7.69
Bobby	57.14	28.57	14.29	58.33	25.0	16.67	+1.19	-3.57	+2.38
Cathy	33.33	46.67	20.0	56.67	0.0	43.33	+23.33	-46.67	+23.33
Isabelle	50.0	0.0	50.0	40.0	30.0	30.0	-10.0	+30.0	-20.0
Frank	50.0	25.0	25.0	72.97	5.41	21.62	+22.97	-19.59	-3.38
Emma	0.0	14.29	85.71	66.67	12.5	20.83	+66.67	-1.79	-64.88
Henry	25.0	0.0	75.0	73.68	0.0	26.32	+48.68	0.0	-48.68

4.1.2. Increase Use and Changes in Incomplete Sentences

Tables (4) above and Table (5) below categorize participants' use of incomplete sentences in the pre- and post-SA interviews by ending type. Table (5) (pre-SA) includes *kedo/ga*, *kara*, *te*-form, and particle endings, while Table (6) (post-SA), on the following page, additionally includes *tari*, *toka*, and *mitai*. The "other" category comprises utterance-final extent expressions such as *totemo*, *chotto*, *daitai*, *amari*, and *tsuite*.

TABLE (5)

TYPES OF INCS-ENDING IN PRE-SA JAPANESE INTERVIEWS

Student	Pre % If-PF	Pre % NTRI	Pre % Dt-PF	Post % If-PF	Post % NTRI	Post % Dt-PF
Bobby	2	1	0	0	1	0
Cathy	7	2	2	1	1	1
Frank	5	2	1	0	1	1
Emma	10	5	4	1	0	0
Henry	5	3	1	0	0	1
Total	29	13	8	2	3	3

TABLE (6)
TYPES OF INCS-ENDING IN POST-SA JAPANESE INTERVIEWS

Student	Total	<i>kedo/ga</i>	<i>kara</i>	Te form	Particle ending	<i>tari</i>	<i>toka</i>	<i>mitai</i>	others
Anna (NH)	5	0	1	2	2	0	0	0	0
Bobby (IL)	8	0	0	1	6	0	0	0	1
Cathy (IM)	13	6	3	1	2	0	0	1	0
Isabelle (IM)	14	0	10	0	2	0	0	2	0
Frank (IH)	15	6	3	2	1	1	0	1	1
Emma (IH)	13	3	0	2	6	0	0	1	1
Henry (AL)	18	5	2	3	1	2	4	0	1
Total	86	20	19	11	20	3	4	5	4

Prior to SA, only five participants used incomplete sentences in their speech. After their return, however, all participants produced incomplete sentences, and they employed a greater variety of incomplete-sentence endings. Before SA, 80.8% of the 29 suspended clauses were *kara* [because] and *kedo* [but] clauses. Post-SA, the total number of suspended clauses more than tripled, while *kara/kedo* clauses accounted for only 44.7%. In addition, Cathy, Isabelle, Frank, Emma, and Henry began using *-tari*, *-toka*, and *-mitai* as utterance-final forms. The most notable increase occurred in Henry's speech: rated Advanced-Low upon his return, he used incomplete sentences more than three times as frequently as in the pre-SA interviews and employed a wider variety of endings.

4.2. Findings From the Qualitative Analysis

4.2.1. Decrease of Inappropriate Use of Informal-Speech-Style Plain Forms (IfSS-PFs)

The qualitative analysis revealed that Anna, Bobby, Cathy, and Isabelle used inappropriate IfSS-PFs in contexts categorized as high-addressee-awareness situations during the pre-SA interviews. Using IfSS-PFs for speech acts such as requests, apologies, and expressions of thanks in *masu*-form-predominant contexts is often regarded as rude and disrespectful (Iwasaki, 2008). Excerpt 1 illustrates this pattern: Bobby inappropriately omitted

gozaimasu in the speech act of thanking. When the interviewer closed the interview by saying Arigatō gozaimashita [thank you] (line 1), Bobby responded with the inappropriate plain-form equivalent, arigatō.

Excerpt 1 (Bobby, Pre-SA)

1 Interviewer *Jaa, intabyuu wa koko made desu. Arigatō gozaimashita.*

DM interview TOP here until COP. Thank you.

[Well then, the interview is over. Thank you.]

Bobby ***Arigatō.***

Thank you.

[Thanks.]

Similarly, Isabelle and Cathy used IfSS-PFs and a te-form request inappropriately when asking the interviewer to repeat a statement.

Excerpt 4 (Isabelle, Pre-SA Japanese interview)

1 Interviewer *Dare ga imasu ka.*

Who SUB exist Q

[Who is there (in your family)?]

2 Isabelle *Anoo, chotto, **mat-te**.*

DM a little wait-TE.

[Umm, wait a little bit,]

3 Isabelle *anoo, chotto kikoe-nikui, kiko**enikukatta**...*

DM a little hear-difficul(t), hear-difficult-PST

[Well, it is little difficult to hear, it was little difficult to hear]

In line 2, Isabelle asked the interviewer to wait a moment by using the verb te-form *matte*, an informal request form. She then gave a reason for her request in the plain form *kikoenikukatta* [it was difficult to hear] in line 3. Similarly, Cathy asked the interviewer to repeat by omitting the copula: *Maffin-chan* (the name of her pet) *wa okii kara, mō ichido* [one more time because my pet was too loud (and I could not hear what you said)]. Isabelle's use of IfSS-PFs

- 4 Isabelle *sore wa chotto, muzukashī yo ne.*
 That SUB a little difficult SFP SFP
 [That is little bit, difficult (to explain), you know.]
- 5 Isabelle *anō, amerika-jin ja-nakere ba, chotto muzukashī to*
omoimasu.
 DM American COP-neg-if a little difficult QT think
 [Well, I think it is difficult (to understand it) if you are
 not an American.]

In line 2, Isabelle began clarifying what she meant by *kōkōsei mitai na koto* [things that high school students are likely to do]. In line 3, however, she added that it is difficult for non-Americans to understand what American eighth graders normally do—or are permitted to do. In line 4, she expressed this difficulty using the plain form *muzukashī* [it is difficult] with multiple sentence-final particles (*yo ne*), which may convey an obtrusive tone. Many native speakers of Japanese avoid this combination when speaking with someone of higher social status (Izuhara, 2003). In line 5, however, Isabelle immediately corrected herself by providing a more detailed explanation with the *masu* form *omoimasu* [I think], which mitigated the inappropriateness of her earlier use of *yo ne*.

4.2.2. Changes In DtSS-PFs And IfSS-PFs

Prior to their SA sojourns, most participants used DtSS-PFs without sentence-final particles (SFPs) in soliloquy, either to process language by repeating after the interviewer or to reinforce their own self-conviction (Ikuta, 2008; Makino, 2002). Only Emma used a DtSS-PF with the recalling SFP *kke* (e.g., *nan da kke* [what was it]) in the pre-SA interviews.

In the post-SA interviews, however, Cathy and Frank used DtSS-PFs with SFPs more actively. For example, Cathy employed the multiple SFPs *ka na* (e.g., *kinō datta ka na* [I wonder if it was yesterday]) to indicate that she was thinking aloud rather than speaking directly to the interviewer. Below are selected examples of Cathy's use of DtSS-PFs in the post-SA interviews.

Excerpt 5 (Cathy, Post-SA Japanese interview)

- 1 Cathy *A, watashi, takusan ēmēru ga kuru hanzai ni-tsuite,*

DM I many email SUB come crime about

koronbasu no hanzai ni-tsuite no mēru ga, sore ga, chotto shinpai

Columbus LK crime about LK emails SUB that SUB a little worried

shimasu.

do

[I received a lot of emails about crime, crimes in Columbus, and I am worried about it little bit.]

2 Interviewer *Anō, donna hanzai nan desu ka.*

DM what-kind crime NOM COP Q

[Well, what kinds of crime?]

3 Cathy *Tatoeba, kinō da-tta ka na.*

For example yesterday COP-PST Q SFP

[For example, it was yesterday, I believe]

4 Cathy *Hitori no josē ga, san-ji, asa no san-ji ni arui-ta toki ni,*

One LK woman SUB three-o'clock morning LK three at walk-PST when

mata, dare-ka ōkii dansei ga, josē wo utte... kaban wo

Again someone big man SUB woman O hit-TE bag O

Torima-shita.

grab-PST

[When a woman was walking at 3 am, again, a tall guy hit the woman and stole her bag.]

In line 1, Cathy stated that she was worried about crime in her city, using a masu-form ending. When the interviewer asked her to provide more information, she began describing one incident (line 3) with the plain form *kinō datta* [it was yesterday], accompanied by the multiple SFPs *ka na* [I wonder]. When *ka na* follows a plain form, the utterance conveys wondering or

supposition, giving it the quality of a soliloquy rather than an addressee-directed statement (Cook, 2006; Masuda, 2010; Okazaki, 2015). Thus, Cathy's plain-form use with *ka na* in line 3 was appropriate. Immediately after this soliloquy-like utterance, she continued her description in the *masu* form, suggesting development in her ICC. A similar use of DtSS-PF was observed in Frank's post-SA Japanese when he produced *hon-dana da kke* ("I think it was called *hon-dana*") to signal that he was thinking aloud about whether *hon-dana* was the correct word, rather than asking the interviewer directly.

Not all changes, however, can be considered indicators of ICC development. For instance, Frank also used *nan to iu* [what is it called?/how do I say it?] when he was trying to recall information. The same form, which functions as an IfSS interrogative in Japanese (Okazaki, 2015), also appeared several times in Emma's post-SA speech. As noted earlier, Emma had used the DtSS-PF *nan da kke* [I'm trying to recall what it was] three times in the pre-SA OPI when recalling information. After returning from Japan, however, she no longer used *nan da kke* but instead employed *nan to/te iu* [what is it called?].

4.2.3. Use of NTRI: Inappropriate Use of IfSS-PF

As noted previously, the use of next-turn repair initiatives (NTRIs) is characteristic of L2 Japanese speakers and reflects limited linguistic competence (Taguchi, 2015). Excerpt 6 illustrates Anna's use of an NTRI. All participants except Isabelle and Henry employed NTRIs prior to their SA sojourns.

Excerpt 6 (Anna, Post-SA Japanese Interview)

1 Interviewer *Kono intabyuu no ato de nani wo shimasu ka.*

This interview LK after what OB do Q.

[What will you do after this interview?]

2 Anna *Kyou no intabyuu?*

Today LK interview?

[you mean, today's interview?]

Upon returning from SA, Cathy no longer used NTRIs and instead employed the SFP *datta ka na*, as discussed in Excerpt 5. The other participants' utterances, with the exception of Henry's, still included NTRIs, although most used them less frequently than in the pre-SA interviews (see Table 3).

4.2.4. DtSS-PF for Co-constructions

All participants also used plain forms when responding to the interviewer's follow-up questions or when asking for help in recalling a word or phrase they had previously mentioned. This type of plain-form use is categorized as a detached plain form (DtSS-PF), as L1 speakers typically employ it when focusing on the content of the information rather than on their relationship with the conversation partner. Excerpt 7 illustrates an example from Henry's post-SA interview.

Excerpt 7 (Henry, Post-SA Japanese Interview)

- 1 Interviewer *Dō shite suki nan desu ka.*
How do-TE like NOM COP Q
[Why do you like (the place)?]
- 2 Henry *Maa, fūkei ga sugoi desu.*
Well, scenery SUB awesome COP
[Well, the scenery is awesome.]
- 3 Interviewer *Jaa, chotto sono fūkei ni tsuite oshiete kudasai, watashi ga sōzō*
Well, a little that scenery about tell-TE give-me. I SUB imagine
dekiru yō ni.
can the way
[Well, please describe the scenery so that I can picture it in my head.]
- 4 Henry *Ma, nishi ni yama ga atte,*
Well, west LOC mountain SUB exist-TE
[Well, there is a mountain in the west, and]
- 5 Henry *Mori ga atte,*
Forest SUB exist-TE
[there is a forest, and]

- 6 Henry *Demo, higashi ni umi no naka-ni chīsai shima ga, atte*
But, east LOC ocean LK in the middle-LOC small island
SUB exist-TE
[but, there is a small island in the middle of (on) the ocean
in the east, and]
- 7 Henry *Totemo midori no shima de,*
Very green LK islands COP-TE
[it's a very green island, and]
- 8 Henry *Sore-ni kirei na akai hashi ga atte*
What more beautiful NOM red bridge SUM exist-TE
[what's more, there is a beautiful red bridge, and]
- 9 Henry *Totemo ii tokoro desu.*
Very good place COP.
[It's a very nice place.]
- 10 Interviewer *A, soo desu ka. Wakarima-shita. Sumimasen, nani-jima de-
shita kke?*
Oh, then-COP-Q understand-PST sorry what-island COP-
PST FSP
[Is that so. I see. I'm sorry, but what island was it?]
- 11 Henry ***Matsu-shima.***
[Matsu-island]
- 12 Interviewer *Jaa, kondo itte mimas, Tōhoku. Demo watashi iku kikai ga*
Then, next time go-TE try, Tohoku. But I go change SUB
amari nai no de nē.
Much don't have NOM COP-TE SFP.

[Well then, I will try going there next time. Tohoku, but I don't have many opportunities to visit there so... you know.]

13 Henry *Itte kudasai.*

Go-TE give me.

[Please visit (there).]

In line 1, the interviewer asked why Matsushima was Henry's favorite. From lines 2 to 9, Henry responded to the interviewer's questions using *masu* forms appropriately across multiple clauses (lines 4–9). In line 10, the interviewer forgot the name of the place and asked for clarification using the recalling SFP *kke*. In response, Henry produced a noun without a copula (NPw/oC) in line 11. Henry's use of NPw/oC in this context is similar to what Ikuta (2008) described as a backchannel "to facilitate the completion" (p. 81) of the interviewer's preceding utterance, *Kondo itte mimasu* [I will try to go (there)], in line 12. After the interviewer expressed her interest in visiting the location, Henry shifted his speech style to the *masu*-form equivalent of a request (*-te kudasai* [please]), reflecting his heightened awareness of the addressee.

5. Discussion

5.1. Insights from Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses

The quantitative analysis revealed two key findings: All students greatly increased their use of incomplete sentences (IncSs) in the post-SA interviews. In addition, all students, except Bobby, increased their use of plain forms in the post-SA interviews. While Bobby slightly increased his use of *masu* forms (+0.63%), the other participants decreased. However, all of them used *masu*-form predominantly (67% or more) even in the post-SA interviews.

The qualitative analysis shows that students did not simply adopt informal styles but instead used plain forms more strategically to balance approachability with politeness. All participants still relied primarily on *masu* forms in post-SA interviews, demonstrating that they could maintain appropriate levels of formality while expanding their range of speech styles. This finding contrasts with earlier research reporting an overuse of plain forms after SA (Marriot, 1995; Iwasaki, 2008). The reduction in NTRIs and assessments further suggests greater ability to manage communication smoothly in intercultural contexts.

Inappropriate uses of IfSS-PFs before SA (e.g., in high-addressee-awareness situations) largely disappeared after SA. Isabelle, for example, self-corrected her speech without disrupting the conversation, reflecting growth in both cultural and linguistic awareness. Similarly, several participants expanded their use of DtSS-PFs. While pre-SA usage was often limited to simple soliloquy-like utterances, post-SA usage incorporated SFPs to express stance, co-construct ideas, and provide background information. Although DtSS-PF use decreased for some participants, such changes were not uniformly negative; Henry, for instance, had already employed them actively pre-SA.

At the same time, idiosyncratic shifts appeared. Emma and Frank repeatedly used *nan to/te iu* [what is it called?] instead of the more appropriate *nan da kke*. This may represent either negative L1 transfer from English or partial learning of the Japanese recalling form. Such mixed outcomes highlight the influence of individual factors, including motivation (Tobaru, 2023) and program characteristics (Tobaru, 2025).

When compared with L1 speakers in prior research, some participants' reliance on *masu* forms remained high (72.1% vs. 52.5% in Masuda, 2010, and 69% in Okazaki, 2015). While movement toward L1 norms aids communicative effectiveness, scholars increasingly stress the value of ICC as the ability to interact successfully across cultures rather than to emulate native speakers (Tran & Duong, 2018; Moody, 2018, 2019; Zhang & Jian, 2021). In this sense, students' strategic use of plain forms, even when not fully aligned with L1 norms, reflects ICC development.

5.2. Pedagogical Implications

Style-shifting skills take years to develop among L1 speakers, suggesting the need for explicit preparation before SA (Schmidt, 1990). Instruction at home institutions should therefore emphasize both *masu* and plain forms, including informal and detached plain-form varieties. Classroom activities can be adapted from existing textbook dialogues by recontextualizing *masu*-form interactions into plain-form conversations between peers. Through such exercises, learners can better recognize how speech style indexes relationships.

Explicit attention to addressee awareness should also be included. Beginning students can focus on avoiding plain forms in high-addressee-awareness contexts, while advanced students can practice adjusting plain forms in *masu*-dominant settings to align identity with relational goals. Taguchi and

Yoshimi (2019) provide further examples of effective instruction for Japanese style shifting.

5.3. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has two main limitations. First, the OPI format may not fully capture ICC, as it privileges interviewer-led exchanges and underrepresents skills such as backchanneling (*aizuchi*) (Ikuta, 1983, 2008). Since style shifting is often employed to facilitate natural interaction, conversational data would likely yield deeper insights (Zeng, 2015). Second, judgments of IfSS-PF and DtSS-PF use were made primarily by the researcher, whose background as an older Japanese instructor may not fully reflect younger generations' speech-style norms.

Future research should therefore incorporate naturalistic conversational data, both informal and formal, at multiple time points to track development. Stimulated recall could further reveal learners' perceptions of style-shifting changes, such as Emma's replacement of *nan da kke* with *nan to iu*. Longitudinal studies are also needed to capture ICC development over extended periods.

6. Conclusion

This study examined Japanese speech style shifting as a measure of the behavioral dimension of ICC development among SA students. Although individual differences emerged, the findings suggest that, overall, participants learned to sound more approachable while maintaining appropriate levels of politeness. This indicates that they are now better equipped to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural interactions using Japanese.

Style shifting is not unique to Japanese; all spoken languages display stylistic variation, including regional and social dialects, registers, and levels of formality. Speakers routinely draw on multiple speech styles to adapt to context and achieve communicative effectiveness. While the specific linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies vary across languages, analyzing the development of style-shifting skills offers a valuable means of assessing the behavioral dimension of ICC in diverse linguistic settings.

If foreign language education seeks to cultivate skills that AI cannot replicate—such as nuanced verbal adaptability and context-sensitive behavioral competence—then greater emphasis must be placed on behavioral

outcomes in ICC research. Such a focus will not only advance theoretical understanding but also better prepare students to meet the communicative demands of an increasingly complex global workforce.

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Appendix A: Abbreviations used in morpheme-by-morpheme glosses

<u>Kimasu</u> (underline)	Desu/masu form
Kuru (bold)	Plain form
<u>Hanashite</u>	Incomplete sentence ending
COP	Various forms of copula verb <i>be</i>
LK	Linking nominal
NEG	Negative morpheme
PST	Past tense
NOM	Nominalizer
O	Object marker
SUB	Subject maker
Q	Question marker
QT	Quotative marker
SFP	Sentence final particle
TOP	Topic marker
DM	Discourse marker, fillers
TE	Te-form (gerund; conjunctive particle <i>te</i>)
LOC	Locative