

# **Politeness and the English Language According to Japanese Exchange Students**

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Kohteliaisuus on yksi vuorovaikutuksen kulmakivistä. Eri kulttuureilla ja kielillä on kuitenkin omat keinonsa ilmentää kohteliaisuutta. Kulttuurienvälisen vuorovaikutuksen näkökulmasta nämä kulttuurilliset ja kielelliset erot kohteliaisuudessa ovat mielenkiintoinen tutkimuskohde erityisesti silloin, kun tutkimuksen kohteena on kaksi kieltä ja kulttuuria, jotka eroavat varsin paljon keskeisiltä lähtökohdiltaan.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena olikin selvittää, millaisena ilmiönä japanilaiset Suomessa opiskelevat vaihto-opiskelijat käsittävät kohteliaisuuden ja millaisia strategioita heillä on kohteliaisuuden ilmentämiseen englannin kielellä. Myös kielipedagoginen näkökulma sitoutuu läheisesti tähän tutkimukseen, sillä tutkimuskohteena olevien vaihto-opiskelijoiden aiemmat kieliopinnot kotimaassaan vaikuttavat englannin kielen osaamiseen ja siten kielellisiin strategioihin. Lisäksi tämä tutkimus pyrki selvittämään, millaisia kulttuurillisia eroja vaihto-opiskelijat ovat vaihtonsa aikana huomanneet Suomen ja Japanin välillä kohteliaisuudessa.</p> <p>Tutkimus osoitti, että japanin kielen kieliopillistuneet kohteliaat ilmaisut ovat keskeinen lähtökohta vaihto-opiskelijoiden käsityksille kohteliaisuudesta, sillä niiden avulla he määrittelevät sitä, mikä on kohteliasta ja mikä ei. Englannin kielessä heillä on repertoarissaan monia vaihtoehtoisia ilmaisuja ja heille on myös kehittynyt kyky hahmottaa niiden välisiä nyansseja, vaikka kielen opetus heidän kotimaassaan ei olisikaan suoranaisesti antanut heille resursseja siihen. Vaihto-opiskelijat nostavat myös esiin erityisesti ihmistenvälisen suhteiden eroavaisuuksia suomalaisen ja japanilaisen kulttuurin välillä; esimerkiksi opettaja-opiskelija-suhteen epämuodollisuuden. Jatkotutkimusta aiheesta voisi tehdä esimerkiksi suuremmalla skaalalla fokuoituna kielimuotoihin, tai vaihtoehtoisesti varioivammalla osallistujajoukolla liittyen kulttuurienvälisiin eroihin, jotta tutkimukseen saataisiin näkökulmia elämän eri osa-alueilta.</p>	
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# 1 Introduction

Politeness is a cornerstone of fluent interaction (e.g., Janney & Arndt 2005: 21; Bargiela-Chiappini & Kadar 2011: 2). Difficulties may, however, arise especially within intercultural communication when the cultural and linguistic politeness strategies between interactants are vastly different (Haugh 2004; Culpeper 2011: 21-22). The present study is focused on the views Japanese exchange students have on politeness, and how their use of English reflects these views. As both the conceptualisation and the realisation of politeness in language differs quite drastically between Japan and English-speaking countries (e.g., Haugh 2004: 86; Janney & Arndt 2005; Culpeper 2011: 21-22), the present study attempts to explore this topic from the perspective of practical use of English as a lingua franca (=language used as a communicative tool between non-native speakers). Additionally, English education in Japan will be noted as a background within the present study as the focus is on English as a foreign language (EFL) speakers whose English education is pivotal in their strategies of English use. However, the present study will not focus on the education specifically, but it will instead be present as a framework to contextualise the findings.

The perspective of Japanese exchange students' practical use of politeness strategies in English explored in the present study will add to the sphere of politeness research, which has previously mostly focused on politeness strategies employed by native speakers. In intercultural communication politeness strategies have also been studied in the more recent years, but the views of Japanese exchange students have not been explicitly represented. The present study will explore what contributes to politeness in the mind of Japanese exchange students. Japanese politeness is multifaceted and complex, centred highly around the linguistic polite expressions known collectively as *keigo* (Nurjaleka, Nurhayati & Supriatnaningsih 2022; Coulmas 2005). In addition to a more general view on politeness, the present study will examine practical English use within various communicative situations. The focus will be on communicational strategies and polite expressions utilised by the participants. Finally, the present study explores possible cultural differences in interaction between Japan and Finland, taking advantage of the physical context in which the present study is conducted.

In this report, I will begin by conceptualising politeness within the Japanese society by firstly presenting the theoretical background on politeness, comparing the Japanese conceptualisation to a more Western conceptualisation which is present in the English language, and then exploring in more detail the Japanese honorific language, *keigo*, as well as the framework of

English education in Japan. Then I will present the methodology and procedures with which the present study was conducted. Results of the interviews will be presented and analysed. I shall conclude by discussing the main results of the present study and proposing possible further research in the area.

## **2 Conceptualising politeness within the Japanese society**

To preface the present study, I will present theoretical background concerning politeness within pragmatic research in relation to intercultural communication, as the present study is concerned with an intercultural phenomenon. I will also explore the framework of politeness in the Japanese society in comparison to a more Western conceptualisation in English-speaking countries. I will additionally explain the basic structures of the Japanese polite language as it is closely related to the Japanese conceptualisation of politeness. Finally, I will briefly investigate English education in Japan, as the present study focuses on Japanese EFL speakers.

### **2.1 Politeness and intercultural communication**

Politeness is a rather interesting topic within pragmatic research as well as other disciplines in linguistics (Bargiela-Chiappini & Kádár 2011: 1). Despite its popularity as a topic of research the term itself is difficult to define, as conceptualisations differ within various languages and cultures (e.g., Haugh 2004: 86; Janney & Arndt 2005; Culpeper 2011: 21-22). Politeness research has historically mainly been conducted in English within English-speaking communities that share rather little with the Japanese conceptualisations of politeness (e.g., Watts 2005: 55; Haugh 2004: 85-86). There are similarities within the conceptualisations, but differences between cultures are significant and control the way in which politeness manifests through interaction in various situations (e.g., Ide et al. 2005: 281; Bargiela-Chiappini & Kádár 2011: 2).

Each culture values different things in communication and relationships (Holtgraves 1992: 152). The Japanese society is often considered to be more collectivist than individualistic, which is one of the most notable differences between the structures of the culture in English-speaking areas (such as the US or the UK) and Japan. The group dynamics pose difficulties in defining the notions of ‘face’ in a comprehensive manner (Culpeper 2011: 21, 24-25).

Situational norms and the expectations which a culture sets for specific situations also define that which is considered ‘impolite’ within interactions (Culpeper 2011: 22; Holtgraves 1992: 155). Politeness in English used to be a marker of higher class within the society but is currently only used as a marker of formality rather than to create status differentiations (Haugh 2004: 90). Modern English only has one second person pronoun regardless of plurality or formality, and while the use of last names is common as a formal form of address, the use of first names is

increasing (Clyne et al. 2009: 4, 18; Haugh 2004: 88). Honorifics in English are mainly limited to highly formal situations, and include such address terms as ‘sir’, ‘madam’ or ‘ma’am’ (Clyne et al. 1992: 4). In Japanese, the objective is to show respect to the other party, as the cultural orientation is focused on the group rather than the individual (e.g., Haugh 2004: 98). Further exploration of how politeness manifests through the Japanese language will be inquired in a later sub-section.

Another intriguing difference between the conceptualisation of politeness in Japanese and English is the concept of friendliness in relation to politeness. In English, the goal of interaction is often to appear friendly and to build rapport between the interactional parties, whereas in Japanese, the friendly aspect of interaction is only present within familiar parties in the same ingroup (e.g., Nurjaleka et al. 2022). In other words, Japanese politeness is designed to keep up the social distance between the interactants, whereas English politeness often attempts to find common ground between the interactants (Ide et al. 2005). Thus, the goal of politeness is somewhat different at its core. Ide et al (2005) found in their study that the friendliness aspect was its own separate concept in Japanese, while in English it was part of the conceptualisation of politeness.

Misunderstandings within intercultural communication often stem from differences in expressing politeness (Haugh 2004: 87; Holtgraves 1992: 155; Janney & Arndt 2005), and thus learning about the culture when learning a language is crucial to understanding the nature of these differences and being able to communicate in an intercultural context (Haugh 2004: 87). Not only does the manner in which thoughts are expressed matter but the way in which others interpret the message also counts into what is perceived as polite (Bargiela-Chiappini & Kádár 2011: 4). The nature of the socially accepted in Japan differs quite significantly from that of English-speaking countries (as well as generally the Western conceptualisation of politeness), so learning to communicate in English can be difficult for some learners of English in Japan (Takanashi 2004: 9, 11, 12). This may include their ability to use appropriate forms in English or their perception of situations in which English is used (Takanashi 2004).

## **2.2 Politeness in Japan**

The Japanese politeness system manifests through social norms relating to both horizontal and vertical separations of people into ingroups and outgroups as well as hierarchically into higher and lower societal status. These differences are expressed in the Japanese language through

grammatical forms (honorifics) which change depending on who is speaking to whom and what their interpersonal relationship is (Ide 1982; Haugh 2004: 96-97, 105; Nurjaleka et al. 2022). Since the Japanese language is very directly connected to the conceptualisation of politeness in Japan, adapting to another culture and language may be challenging (Takanashi 2004).

The term ‘politeness’ has several different translations into Japanese, all with their own nuances and uses (Haugh 2004). Thus, the term ‘politeness’ on its own may not be adequate to describe the entirety of the Japanese conceptualisation, or at the very least should contain each of these definitions separately. The term *teinei* (adj. *teinei-na*), ‘polite, civil’, refers to the aspect of politeness that shows courtesy and kindness toward others (Haugh 2004; Nurjaleka et al. 2022). *Reigi tadashii*, ‘correct manners’, refers to correctness according to social norms (Haugh 2004; Nurjaleka et al. 2022). The latter is also related to the term *keii*, ‘respect, honour’, which refers to upward respect toward someone of higher status or horizontally in an outgroup, as well as modesty and humbling oneself and one’s ingroup (Haugh 2004; Nurjaleka et al. 2022). Both the respect and the modesty are expressed through grammatical forms known as *keigo* (‘honorific language’).

**Keigo** can be divided into three main categories: *teineigo* ‘polite language’, *kenjougo* ‘humble language’, and *sonkeigo* ‘respectful language’ (Nurjaleka et al. 2022; Coulmas 2005). **Teineigo** is the most basic level of politeness and is used in formal situations in which the participants do not have a particular relationship, e.g., meeting a stranger on the street. It uses the copula *desu* as well as the formal suffix *-masu* in other verbs (Nurjaleka et al. 2022). **Kenjougo** is used to humble oneself and one’s ingroup members, e.g., when talking about one’s co-workers with a client. This form of *keigo* has its own verbal suffixes such as *-orimasu* ‘to be’ and *-itadakimasu* ‘to be allowed to’ (Nurjaleka et al. 2022). **Sonkeigo**, then, is used to show respect to someone in a higher position and to elevate them within the conversation. Forms of *sonkeigo* are used when talking to and about e.g., superiors or customers. The grammatical forms include verbal forms such as *irasshaimasu* ‘to be’, honorific suffixes after names (e.g., *-san*, *-sama*, or the professional rank of a person) and honorific prefixes to nouns (e.g., *go-kazoku* ‘your family’ or *o-namae* ‘your name’) (Coulmas 2005: 314-315; Nurjaleka et al. 2022; Ide 1982). Sometimes the use of honorific prefixes is taken as part of a fourth category of *keigo*, **bikago** (beautifying language), but some of the words have become so common that they can hardly be referred to as a different aspect of honorifics anymore (Coulmas 2005; Ide 1982). Ide (1982) also notes that *bikago* could be seen as exclusively a feature of women’s language as they tend to speak



relatively more polite than men, but the situation has undergone changes since the publication of the article.

The use of honorifics shifted slightly after The Second World War, as the Japanese society adopted a more democratic system (Coulmas 2005: 305). Before the war, the honorifics were used specifically to mark status differences within society, but after the war they partially shifted into an indicator of mutual respect: *keii hyougen*, ‘expressing honour’ (Coulmas 2005: 305; Haugh 2004: 96-97). This change has in fact increased the use of polite grammatical forms in present-day society (Coulmas 2005: 306). In practice this refers to the fact that now, instead of people in higher positions “speaking down” to people below them and only the people in lower positions using polite language, both parties use polite forms according to social norms based upon the system of ingroups and outgroups.

The ingroups (*uchi*) and outgroups (*soto*) are significant in the Japanese society (Takanashi 2004: 7). *Uchi* can refer to the individual themselves or include their family or company depending on the situational context. *Soto* then refers to anyone outside this group (Nurjaleka et al. 2022; Takanashi 2004). For example, due to their higher status within a company, one’s boss would belong in the outgroup when one is conversing with them, requiring the use of honorifics (i.e., alternating between *sonkeigo* and *kenjougo* depending on who the subject is). Within ingroups such as family or close friend groups, honorifics are seldom used. One might use casual or familiar language, which falls outside of the realm of *keigo* and uses plain forms of verbs, to converse with friends and family (e.g., Nurjaleka et al. 2022).

### **2.3 Japanese English education and Japanese English**

Japanese students usually first start studying English in Junior High School, at around the age of 12-13, which is among the highest in the world (Iino 2002: 92; Takanashi 2004: 3). However, in more recent years since a reform in the MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) Guidelines, the English language may be introduced to the curriculum already in elementary school (McKenzie 2010: 8-9, Hosoki 2011: 207). English education in Japan is mainly focused on grammar and vocabulary (Takanashi 2004: 5, 9; Hosoki 2011: 201-202). The purpose of studying English for many is passing university entrance examinations, in which English is a mandatory test subject (Iino 2002: 83). Reading and translating texts is one of the main studying methods (Takanashi 2004: 9) due to the types of tasks present in the entrance examinations, which do not have an oral segment (Iino 2002: 83; Hosoki 2011: 203,

208, McKenzie 2010: 10). Some schools offer native speaker teachers in order to aid the communicational aspect (McKenzie 2010: 10), but even so, conversational capabilities often take a backseat in Japanese English classes.

Difficulties in oral communication arise from not only linguistic but also cultural differences between English-speaking communities and Japan. Takanashi (2004: 7) notes that the clear distinction to ingroups and outgroups in Japanese culture may be a clear reason as to why communication in English is perceived as difficult in Japan. English-speaking cultures gravitate more toward the ingroups, and a concept known in Japanese as *honne*, ‘true feelings’. Thus, English-speaking people tend to be more open, whereas Japanese people emphasize outgroups and *tatemae*, ‘face / public appearance’. (Takanashi 2004: 7.) Social norms are also cited as a possible cause for anxiety when using English within a study by Ohata (2005), in which he notes the ingrained nature of behavioural patterns and belief systems. The interviewees in his study all noted adapting to the American cultural standards and accommodating to a more assertive role in classroom settings as difficult (Ohata 2005: 11). While Ohata’s (2005) study focuses on language anxiety, it has some common frameworks with the present study as well; one’s cultural background affects one’s use of language and the attitudes with which one approaches intercultural situations.

Proficiency in English is an additional variable both in the context of language anxiety (Ohata 2005) and within communicational strategies utilized by Japanese learners of English (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987). On the one hand, especially within a higher level of proficiency the students may feel anxious due to a lacking vocabulary, or their inability to use appropriate expressions in specific social contexts (Ohata 2005: 12). On the other hand, the transferal of Japanese-based forms happens more frequently with more proficient speakers, as they have more grammatical and vocabular tools to express such patterns (Takahashi & Beebe 1987: 151). Takahashi & Beebe (1987: 152) found that more proficient Japanese learners of English were prone to using typically Japanese formal language and many more intensifiers more frequently than native speakers of English or lower proficiency learners would; for example, using phrases such as “I am honoured”, “I apologise”, “I deeply appreciate it”. The patterns of Japanese honorifics seem to persist in the speech of Japanese learners of English, and the more proficient they are, the more they attempt to mimic those patterns using English. Takanashi (2004: 11) also notes a similar pattern of modifying the English language to resemble Japanese conventions, sometimes resulting in overly polite expressions or comparably somewhat

impolite or even rude language depending on the situation. He describes this as “inappropriate uses of speech styles in English” (Takanashi 2004: 12).

### **3 The present study**

This section will elaborate the aim of the present study in relation to the theoretical background. Additionally, the methods chosen to execute the present study will be examined within this section to provide reasoning as to why this study is conducted in a particular manner.

#### **3.1 The aim and the research questions**

The collectivist nature of the Japanese society with its conventions of politeness within the language itself raises a variety of interesting questions when it comes to the practical use of English by Japanese natives. Politeness can be defined through societal norms within a specific culture, as can be seen in the plethora of definitions for politeness in the Japanese language (Haugh 2004: 86). These societal norms are in a reciprocal relationship with the language itself; the culture affects the language, and the language affects the culture, thus emphasising the importance of knowledge in both when learning a new language (Haugh 2004: 87; Takanashi 2004). The acknowledgement of differences within the conceptualisations and definitions of politeness between different cultures is essential in situations of intercultural communication (e.g., Holtgraves 1992: 155; Haugh 2004: 87; Janney & Arndt 2005). The inherent qualities of Japanese politeness may affect both the situational awareness of the Japanese EFL speaker and the kind of language they use in an intercultural situation where English is used as a lingua franca (Ide et al. 2005: 281; Takanashi & Beebe 1987). This is due to the cultural values and native language of an individual always being present when learning another language, and thus they also influence the language use (Haugh 2004: 87; Takanashi 2004: 12). English use may be particularly challenging to Japanese people due not only to their English proficiency but also the different politeness conceptualisations (e.g., Takahashi & Beebe 1987; Takanashi 2004; Ohata 2005).

The present study will focus on the views and experiences of Japanese exchange students, concentrating on politeness. The aim is to bring to the sphere of politeness research the perspective of the implementation of politeness conceptualisations to practical English use by Japanese exchange students. While the pedagogical perspective in relation to English proficiency in Japan is a basis for the English use by any Japanese EFL speaker, the present study will only focus on the practical realisation of politeness in their English use as well as their general definitions of the concept itself. However, as their previous experiences using English and their exposure to English-speaking cultures do affect their English use, their

background in English education in addition to possible previous exchange experiences will be considered during the research process despite not being a focal point in the present study.

The physical context in which the present study is conducted is in Finland, and thus the Finnish cultural context may be a factor in the interviewees' views in relation to interactions they have had using English during their exchange. Finland mostly adheres to a Western conceptualisation of politeness, thus differing from the Japanese conceptualisation, opening an avenue for curiosity regarding possible differences in interaction between the two countries. This point of view has thus additionally been included in the present study.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How do Japanese exchange students define politeness?
2. How do Japanese exchange students express politeness in English?
3. What differences do Japanese exchange students find in politeness in interaction between Japan and Finland?

### **3.2 Research interview**

Interviews are a common genre even outside the realm of scientific research. The purpose and basic functions of interviews are familiar to many even if they have not used the method for scientific purposes (Curtis & Curtis 2011: 32). As a data collection method, interviews are commonly utilized within qualitative research (Mann 2016: 36). Their popularity within qualitative research arises from their expository nature and the various possibilities the interview format gives to the researcher (Mann 2016: 40). Interviews allow the investigation of authentic personal experiences, or a more in-depth understanding of a specific topic from the point of view of the research subject (Mann 2016: 40; Curtis & Curtis 2011: 29). The point of an interview is to learn specific information, not to generalise the findings (Curtis & Curtis 2011: 36).

Interviews are generally divided into three subcategories depending on the structure; these are structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews (Curtis & Curtis 2011: 29). The semi-structured interview was chosen as the most fitting interview method for the present study. Semi-structured interviews have a general outline and predefined main questions and the main topics to be discussed during the interview. However, the execution may differ between each interviewee, as it is possible for the interviewer to ask for further elaborations on the answers

the interviewee gives, as well as to ask additional non-scripted questions if necessary (Curtis & Curtis 2011). An unstructured interview is more of a conversation about a given topic. The interviewer will allow the interviewee to speak about the topic freely and can ask for elaborations if needed (Curtis & Curtis 2011).

The present study will utilise a semi-structured interview to examine the views and attitudes of the participants in detail. The semi-structured interview method allows for a more open approach to the enquiry compared to a survey or a questionnaire. Due to not only offering structure but also being open for any changes that may happen during the interview, the semi-structured interview type suits enquiries in which elaborations may be necessary for a deeper understanding of the topic. For this reason, it was chosen as the most suitable data collection method for the present study.

### **3.3 Content analysis**

Content analysis is a common method of data analysis in quantitative research, but it can also be used within qualitative research to analyse the contents of interviews or open-ended survey questions (Neuendorf 2016; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 91). Content analysis usually makes use of written text, which would mean the transcription in the case of data collected via an interview (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 105). The objective of content analysis is to identify characteristics from the data and to decipher what is being said by the participants. This is done to relate the collected data to the research question or questions accurately (Neuendorf 2016: 165; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 92).

Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009: 93) divide the actual process of analysis itself into three separate methods that all emphasize different areas of the data. The data can be classified, and the results shown in e.g., a chart. Classifying the data is the most quantitative of these methods as it measures the number of times something appears within the data. The second method is grouping portions of the data based on the themes that come up within each portion. The emphasis of this method is to find out what is said in the data. The grouping of the data can also be based on factors such as age and gender. The third and final method is to find typicalities within the data and to create generalizations based on them. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 93.)

Content analysis can also be further divided into two general analysis methods based on whether the analysis is more focused on the data itself, or whether the data is analysed based on pre-

selected theoretical backgrounds (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 95-98). Analysis based on theory restricts the data collection methods according to the theoretical background the researcher chooses to analyse their data with (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 97). Analysing texts with this type of method comes rather close to the analysis methods of discourse analysis, the difference only being the focus of the analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 103). Analysis focused on the data itself aims to create a theoretical ensemble out of the data, and additionally has a lot more freedom when it comes to choosing the analysable bits from within the data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 95, 108-109).

The present study utilises the data-focused analysis method to decipher the views and attitudes of the participants from the transcribed interview data as accurately as possible. Practically the approach is to group together relevant information from the data and to relate said information to the research questions.

### **3.4 The participants and the procedures**

The present study focuses on Japanese EFL speakers, and more specifically Japanese exchange students studying in the university of Jyväskylä (JYU). A message asking for volunteers was sent into a Whatsapp group connecting Finnish and Japanese JYU students. The interviewees were chosen from those who expressed their interest in being interviewed. Two of the interviewees volunteered directly by sending a private message regarding the enquiry, and one of them was chosen by randomly contacting one of the seven people who reacted to the initial message with a *thumbs up* emoji.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one. Each interview had the same basic questions, but the order could fluctuate as per the semi-structured interview allows, and additional questions were asked if elaboration was needed. On average the interviews lasted 30 minutes. The structure of the interview moved from the interviewee's conceptualisation of politeness to the more specific personal experiences using English. A situation-specific approach was used to gain deeper information about structures and phrases the interviewees may use in certain situations. Within this part of the interview, the interviewees were asked to say phrases which they might use in different situations, including an instance of written interaction.

Prior to the interview, the interviewees were presented with a consent form which informed them of the purpose of the present study as well as asked for their consent to be recorded during

the interview. Following the interviews, the recorded data was transcribed. The transcriptions were used in the content analysis, and quotes from the transcribed data are presented during the analysis section to illustrate the conclusions. The transcriptions were analysed by extracting the expressed views regarding the main themes of the present study from the transcribed data and analysing them considering the research questions.



## 4 Results and analysis

This section will examine the interviewees' answers to the various interview questions. I shall begin by briefly going through the background of each interviewee regarding their experiences using English and will then move on to the central themes of the present study. I shall analyse the interview results based on the research questions. Quotes from the interviewees' answers will be presented to illustrate the results. The interviewees will hereby be referred to by numbered acronyms (Interviewee 1 = J1, Interviewee 2 = J2, Interviewee 3 = J3).

### 4.1 The interviewees' backgrounds in English education

As stated previously, the background of the interviewees regarding their English education was present within the study process despite not being the focal point of the study. Considering the experiences communicating with native speakers is important within the scope of this study, as these experiences can influence a person's understanding of politeness from the perspective of their knowledge of functional language use. Thus, at the beginning of each interview, the interviewees were asked about the length of their English education as well as whether they had previous exchange experiences.

Two out of the three interviewees had begun their English studies in elementary school, at around the age of 10. J3's experience with English education was different as they had begun already at a cram school at age 3, so their exposure to the language had been the longest. In Japan, cram schools are specialised private educational institutes which offer lessons outside the regular school hours and may focus on teaching a specific subject. However, despite their long exposure to the English language at school, J3 stated that they seldom had opportunities to use English in Japan:

*"I seldom use English when I spend time in Japan. But sometimes I encounter with foreigners in, for example, station or on campus. I would use English to talk to them."*

(J3)

Interviewee J1 was the only one who had participated in an exchange program previously. Their exchange took place in an English-speaking country, and they commented on this experience having somewhat affected their language use:

*“Umm, because in school we learn- only studied English like grammars and vocabulary, like I haven’t- like technically used English, but in- during the exchange program, I need to use my English, so like, more spoken English. Like, change into spoken English. Or like, maybe, because I went to local school [...] I learned a lot of like teenager’s- teenage language, or like more, yeah, casual English.” (J1)*

J1 additionally brings up a crucial detail as they note their education in Japan mainly having consisted of grammar and vocabulary. A similar notion came up in the interview with J2, who also recalled a lack of oral practice:

*“When I was in Japan, I was- I could write, read, and listen to English but like speaking I- I wasn’t able to speak English so much and so fluently.” (J2)*

It can be concluded based on this enquiry that most of the interviewees’ knowledge about practical English use as well as politeness in English comes from the Japanese education system which they attended. These topics will be further elaborated in section 4.3. Section 4.2. will focus on a broader view on politeness in language.

## **4.2 Politeness from a Japanese perspective**

When asked to define what politeness is, the interviewees noted both linguistic and behavioural aspects to the definition. The inherent linguistic politeness of the Japanese language (*keigo*) was prominently present in the answers of all interviewees:

*“In Japanese language we have polite expressions- polite expressions, so like if you use it, it’s polite. [...] We speak differently, so umm, how can I say, which age you are. [...] we need to speak differently but maybe in English it’s not so much. [...] If we met, if we meet firstly, I gonna use keigo to you.” (J1)*

*“In Japanese we have a polite words [...] so we can show the politeness easily, but especially for older, elderly people.” (J2)*

*“When we think about politeness, we first, the first thing that I do is how old they are [...]. When I talk to people older than I am in Japan, I would, I totally would use polite Japanese through language.” (J3)*

As can be seen from these answers, the principals of social distance of relationships and age associated with the use of *keigo* are present in Japanese exchange students’ politeness

conceptualisations. However, in addition to linguistically defined politeness conventions, the interviewees additionally alluded to the importance of behaviour such as body language, facial expressions and interactional consideration as features of politeness:

*“It’s like it’s um, attitude or behavior also, um, influence. It’s not only about the vocabulary, the grammars, but also yeah, body language, like eye contact. Something like that.” (J1)*

*“Like, uh, kindness, like, like um, yeah, be kind or gentle to others. This is the politeness for me.” (J2)*

Closely related to the conceptualisation of politeness in Japan is the indirectness and the aiming toward harmonious cooperation. Japanese people seem to have a tendency to avoid interactional conflicts by means of indirectness:

*“To show our politeness, we often- often hesitate to explain our emotions directly. [...] Maybe in the situation of English, honesty, honesty is sometimes required, yeah, but like when we speak Japanese, we like, we- we don’t lie but um, we- we hesitate to be honest.” (J2)*

*“Japanese people focus on the harmony rather than um how, how correct they are. [...] We regard the harmony as important.” (J3)*

This pursuit for cooperation and harmony shows the group-oriented nature of the Japanese society especially well, as Japanese people would seem to associate cooperation with politeness. The fact that there were no mentions of polite disagreeing in any of the interviewees’ answers indicates that politeness for the Japanese is specifically focused on this group dynamic and the avoidance of conflict. Polite language and behaviour are utilised to prevent conflicts stemming from disagreements. It is likely that a Japanese person will make a compromise out of courtesy to their interactive partner, especially if there is a social imbalance in the relationship between them.

Together these answers seem to imply the multifaceted conceptualisation of politeness in the Japanese society. Politeness is simultaneously the means of building and maintaining social relationships, it is consideration and kind attitude, as well as a tool for smooth communication. The use of socially correct manners was not directly stated as an aspect of politeness by any of the interviewees, but they do allude to it with the mentioned behavioural aspect and keigo, as especially the correct use of keigo requires deep knowledge of mannerisms, not only Japanese

vocabulary and grammar. The close relationship between politeness in the Japanese culture and the language in the form of *keigo* can also be seen in the following quote from J1:

*“Sometimes I feel um like foreigners, like uh they are a bit rude to us, for example in Japan, because they don’t have any- I don’t know if they have or they don’t have but um, I sometimes feel like they are a bit rude to older pers- older people, elderly people. Umm, because they, I know it’s hard to learn keigo, um, to foreigners [...] but I- I sometime think um maybe they should learn it. [...] In Japanese context. Japanese culture.” (J1)*

### **4.3 Expressing politeness in English**

Politeness in English is vastly different in comparison to Japanese politeness, and thus the interviewees noted having some difficulties understanding and expressing politeness in English. There were additionally interesting discrepancies brought up in the interviewees’ answers. The interviewees saw English as a more casual language compared to Japanese, as the difference between different levels of politeness do not appear to be as stark, and there is not as much fluctuation in the politeness levels. However, the differences between the languages seem to cause some trouble in practical use:

*“In English it’s hard for me because I still figure out what is the politeness in English, how can I express politeness in English.” (J1)*

*“In my English level it’s difficult to distinguish [polite and casual].” (J2)*

It appears that the interviewees had never been explicitly educated on polite English, as they had some trouble explaining their use of polite expressions in English. J2 begun by explaining that they had never been taught polite expressions in English but used a variety of them in their examples within the situation-specific task during the interview. J1 explained that they had been told that English does not have politeness, and that each phrase can technically be used with anyone. Considering the strict rules of *keigo*, one can perceive a logic behind this teaching approach to differentiate English nuances from Japanese *keigo*. However, this may give the wrong idea to some students. As J1 notes, they had only realised that English does have politeness during their exchange, which had opened their eyes and inspired them to assess their language use from that perspective as well. Additionally, J2 mentions differences in nuance between English and Japanese which contribute to challenges when they speak English.

*“[...] okay so in Japan, uh, we are taught English- English doesn't have politeness, uh, polite expressions, but actually there- they have. [...] since then I'm really curious like I'm worried about like is it, uh, rude to them or like, but nobody say like you're rude [...] so like I cannot, um, I don't know if my English is impolite or polite [...] I don't know how I can, um, communicate with for example teachers or like older people in English when we first meet.” (J1)*

*“When I consider that politeness, [...] there are th- different nuances between Japanese words and English words [...] I'm often struggle with like translating or explaining my feelings in English. [...] Some Japanese meanings tha- um, don't exist in English words.” (J2)*

The interviewees' answers show that English politeness for them seems to focus mostly on grammatical forms such as the conditional verb forms (will / would / can / could) and not so much on vocabulary (e.g., phrasal verbs vs. their formal counterparts were only mentioned by J1). English honorifics only appeared in the form of 'miss' or 'mister' in one interview (J3) during the situation-specific task when exploring conventions of written communication.

*“I cannot say the exact example but there are two different words but which have the same meaning, but like you use word A to, um, same age but word B to more polite way- in a more polite way. But like we don't learn that polite word but only this [A]” (J1)*

The situation-specific approach gave more information about how politeness in English manifests in practical English use by the interviewees. Despite telling me they did not know polite expressions in English, all interviewees used a variety of structures to express politeness in the prompted situations. In the following I shall present the polite forms used and analyse them briefly.

The oral interactions explored in the interview regarded situations one may encounter while traveling, shopping and in a school environment. I shall first present each interviewee's take on approaching the store clerk:

*“Excuse me, I'd like to find something [...] could you please tell me where it is?” (J1)*

*“Can I ask a question? [...] Can you show me, do you have...?” (J2)*

*“Excuse me, I have something to ask you [...]. I am not sure where the item is located in this store, but can you tell me where is it?” (J3)*

Within these examples, we have both J1 and J3 using a conventional phrase “excuse me” to initiate the interaction. J1 is the only one using conditional verb forms within this example (would, could). J1 is additionally the only one using “please”, which is another politeness convention in English. The next examples deal with asking for directions while traveling:

*“Excuse me [...] maybe I would say do you know like- I like- I would like to go to there, do you know where it is? [...] Could you please tell me how I can go- get to there? ...Thank you so much.” (J1)*

*“So first, excuse me, um, may I ask a question? I want to go to [place name] and can you- could you tell me how to get there? ...Thank you so much.” (J2)*

*“I first, firstly say hello excuse me, I’m a stranger here and could you tell me where is [...]. And I definitely appreciate the help, so I would say thank you in the end of conversation.” (J3)*

These examples showcase each interviewee using the phrase “excuse me” to initiate the interaction. Additionally, each of them uses a conditional verb in their question. J1 is again the only one using “please”, and there is a possibility that it might be due to their exposure to native English speakers using the phrase during their exchange. J2 is also using a more formal phrase to ask permission as they use “may I” in this example. For the final oral situation, they were asked to approach a teacher after a lecture about a question they have:

*“I will ask teachers first do you have time? Then can I a- like may I ask questions or do you have any time that I can ask you a question?” (J1)*

*“Um, hi, thank you for the lecture, um, in the lecture I was wondering [a topic], then, could I ask you about it?” (J2)*

*“Hello, um, today’s lecture was funny, but I have something to ask, I have something that I’m curious about, and then what is, what does [a term] mean, or I’m not sure [a term] means.” (J3)*

In these examples we see J1 showing politeness through consideration by initiating the conversation with the question “do you have time”. Then they move on to asking permission, which they initially did using the auxiliary verb “can” but changed it to “may” immediately after. This shows that they are aware of the difference in nuance between the two auxiliaries and opt to using the more formal one when conversing with a lecturer. J2 begins their question by thanking the lecturer, and J3 initiates the question by commenting on the contents of the

lecture. Finally, I shall present the answers to the task related to written interaction. All interviewees were asked to describe what they would write in an email to a lecturer about their absence:

*“Dear professor’s name I would like to- [...] I apologize [...] I will be absent from the next lesson because [the reason]. [...] I really- I’m really sorry or like I apologize that I cannot attend that class. [...] if you have new information or like, um, assignments or something, um, could you tell me later or like I- I will keep in touch with my classmates. [...] sincerely, best regards or something, and then my name.” (J1)*

*“[...] Dear [Name], hello, my name is [\*redacted name\*], um, from the faculty of [the faculty]. And, tomorrow I have to, um, yeah, tomorrow I have a [reason of absence], and then, I cannot come to the class. And uh, if you- if you will give some assignments or something then could you tell me? Like... then I apologise for the, like, [reason of absence]. Kind regards, [\*redacted name\*].” (J2)*

*“Miss or mister someone, I’m [\*redacted name\*]. I have a class of- I have your- I have your class named something, and I cannot make it on when, the time, but uh, is there anything that I can do instead of, instead of being \*absent from the lecture. Regards [\*redacted name\*].” (J3)*

The main thing that is notable within these examples is the approach to information distribution. J1 prefaced this task by saying that they will always attempt to express their main message toward the beginning of the email as teachers likely do not have the time to read through “a bunch of emails”, thus expressing politeness through consideration. However, J2 and J3 both approached the email very formally by first introducing themselves prior to explaining the reason behind the email, choosing formality instead. Additionally, apologising for the absence is a common theme in the answers by J1 and J2, whereas J3 does not present an apology. As for the beginning and end, both J1 and J2 use the honorific term ‘dear’ to address the recipient, whereas J3 uses the honorifics ‘miss’ or ‘mister’. Each interviewee ends the email conventionally using the sign-off phrase ‘regards’, but J1 gives it another alternative as well: ‘sincerely’.

The email drafts are obviously only such, and do not give a full picture of what a real email might look like, but they do nevertheless indicate the thought processes of the interviewees when constructing an email. Thus, it will give some indication as to what kind of politeness strategies they may use in real life, and what strategies they are likely to abandon. For example,

J1 initially begins the apology as “I am really sorry” but changed it to “I apologise” to account for the formality of the situation. The wording of the question “if you give assignments, could you tell me” in the answers by J1 and J2 is reminiscent of how this information may be asked using Japanese *keigo*, and thus it appears that both J1 and J2 have attempted to utilise *keigo* forms in English using the linguistic resources they have. However, J3 has opted to asking the question in a way which allows them to take a more active role in the situation and sounds rather more conventional in English.

#### 4.4 Finnish and Japanese cultural differences

The Finnish culture mostly adheres to the Western conceptualisation of politeness, and the society tends to be individually oriented rather than group oriented. Cultural differences may arise in situations of intercultural communication, and such experiences were also investigated in the present study. The interviewees noted very few differences based on their experiences, and rather commented on how comfortable it is for them to converse with Finnish people:

*“I think they are really polite [...] this is the first thing that come to my mind. [...] Because they- you are so polite so I- I feel more comfortable to speak- to talk with them [...]. [...] So, like, when I talk to Finnish people then they always wait for- um, wait for me that I finish the c- the my- finish saying my opinions.” (J2)*

*“I think in my opinion Finnish people are really politeness, as politeness as Japanese people. [...] They don’t disturb my story, my- my talking. [...] They totally never deny with- deny my opinion. They embrace anything what I- everything I said, so I feel really comfortable with them.” (J3)*

Both J2 and J3 noted the considerate nature of Finnish people during conversations as part of their experience of them as polite. J2 additionally noted a cultural difference when it comes to the language one uses within a multilingual group.

*“When I- when I had a group work with two Finnish people [...] um, so we were basically talking about uh, talking about the topic in English, but sometimes like um, it’s more easier to speak Finnish for them [...] so when they want to speak Finnish they asked me sorry [\*redacted name\*] we are, we are speaking Finnish a little bit so, so sorry like don’t worry about it [...]. I was really surprised [...]. [...] I was glad that because they asked me, and I thought they are really polite [...]” (J2)*



J2 further elaborated by saying that they had previously felt isolated and uncomfortable in a group setting where they were the only person not understanding the language used, and thus the consideration of the Finnish people had impacted her. Consideration as a characteristic seems to be valued by both J2 and J3 in a polite person. However, J3 did mention Finnish people's tendency not to change their facial expressions when communicating but did not allude to it influencing their reading of Finnish people as polite.

As for differences between Japan and Finland, J2 mentioned Finnish people being more extroverted. According to their experiences, Finnish people are more comfortable approaching new people and strangers than Japanese people are. However, these traits may very well be affected by the situational context and the individual in question. The interviewees are students and thus mainly experience the Finnish culture through their interactions with other students. Biases of interest toward the Japanese culture by those students as well as alternatively the requirement to complete tasks in a school environment may change the way in which the culture presents itself to the Japanese exchange students interviewed here. Had they been living in Finland for longer and interacted with Finnish people in more varied everyday situations, their answers may have been very different.

J1 appears to have had more experiences with cultural differences present. They alluded to differences in directness as well as the casual nature of the Finnish culture.

*“But, like, casual? So, I cannot like- I don't really like find a specific politeness. [...] For example if you talked to teachers, it's a big difference between, uh, compared to Japanese people. Like, for example like, normally- or like the distance between teachers and students it's like quite closer. Umm, compared to Japan.” (J1)*

The casual nature of the Finnish culture surfaces from these answers. It seems J1 has observed Finnish people's social relationships being closer even within relationships that would be socially imbalanced in Japan, and thus finds Finnish interaction more casual. While being casual is not rude nor impolite, it is a significant enough difference for a Japanese native speaker to notice. They noted twice during the interview that they mean the lack of specific politeness as a positive thing, not necessarily a criticism. In Japan, the hierarchical nature of the society influences the language use to keeping up appearances and social distance, resulting in both the fluctuating levels of polite expressions (*keigo*) in addition to expressing oneself indirectly (*tatemaie* vs. *honne*). This is what J1 is likely referring to when they call Japanese a “high complex culture”:

*“Umm, for Japanese people we have a really high complex culture, so like we don’t usually say directly what you want to say, so like it always lead to misunderstanding with interactional context.” (J1)*

The interviewees found some similarities in personality types and seemed not to have encountered very significant differences in interaction. Differences which they did bring up were related to the politeness conceptualisation and the nature of social relationships (the Japanese society has more of a hierarchical structure as opposed to Finland). Japanese people additionally tend to be more indirect compared to Finnish people, and they maintain social distance through the systematic use of polite expressions in the language. However, the interviewees seemed to regard consideration as a highly valued trait within polite (intercultural) communication, and thus they did observe Finnish people as polite regardless of the differences.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore politeness definitions as well as politeness in the English language from the point of view of Japanese exchange students using English as a lingua franca during their exchange. The first research question in the present study relates to how Japanese exchange students define politeness. The results seem to indicate that the exchange students' definitions of politeness coincide with the Japanese conceptualisation: social relationships and distance are created and maintained through politeness strategies which include polite expressions as well as indirect social conduct (e.g., Takanashi 2004: 7; Coulmas 2005). Thus, the Japanese language is present in the politeness definitions of the exchange students as they define polite language by means of the Japanese linguistic forms known as *keigo* (Nurjaleka et al. 2022; Coulmas 2005). However, the aspects of kindness and cooperativeness are also highlighted in the answers by the participants. Politeness in the eyes of Japanese exchange students seems to be a mixture between language and manners, which is in accordance with the Japanese multifaceted conceptualisation (Haugh 2004; Nurjaleka et al. 2022).

The present study additionally enquired Japanese exchange students' politeness strategies in English. Despite expressing some anxiety over using English politely and not knowing what politeness in English really entails (e.g., Takanashi 2004; Ohata 2005), the exchange students participating in the present study used various expressions and seemed to be able to differentiate nuances between certain words. Initial word choices were occasionally corrected into their more polite counterparts in situations which would require a higher level of politeness in Japanese. There were additionally instances of phrasing enquiries how they would be phrased using *keigo*, such as in the case of: "if you give assignments, could you tell me". This shows that the exchange students are using the linguistic resources they have in English to resemble polite structures from their native language. Similar results of proficient English speakers using Japanese-based forms were also found in a study by Takahashi & Beebe (1987). Furthermore, the formatting and information distribution in two of the three email examples seemed to follow closely a set pattern used when writing emails in Japanese.

Politeness in the participants' English mostly entails learned grammatical forms. The word "please" was used by only one of the interviewees, and neither did honorifics nor formal vocabulary emerge in the answers more than once. The previously mentioned results on politeness conceptualisations and English language use highlight a possible avenue for further research into, for example, English pedagogy in Japan. Oral communication may be perceived

as difficult due to linguistic and cultural differences (Takanashi 2004: 7), so knowing more about the culture and mannerisms of people from English-speaking countries may aid Japanese EFL speakers further develop their communicational skills in English, as understanding culture is a vital aspect in language learning (Haugh 2004: 87). Further research might want to consider whether some of the patterns found within the present study also appear in larger samples, as the results of the present study are not generalisable due to the small number of participants.

When it comes to the cultural differences in interaction between Finland and Japan (research question 3), the casual nature of the Finnish culture was the most prominent difference. However, it appears that within an intercultural exchange situation, the politeness conceptualisation may fluctuate to allow for certain aspects of politeness to be emphasised. As the interpretation of messages in communication affects the perception of politeness (Bargiela-Chiappini & Kádár 2011: 4), it may be that exchange students are able to adapt to an intercultural situation by altering their interpretations. For example, the participants consider Finnish people polite based on their being accommodating and considerate, which is a slight divergence from the previously established multifaceted Japanese politeness conceptualisation. However, the lack of social distance between e.g., students and teachers was brought up during the interviews, highlighting a clear difference between the cultures of Finland and Japan. It must be noted, however, that as the context of being an exchange student is rather limited in the interactions it allows for, and the situational context differs from e.g., a working environment, no generalized conclusion can be made based on the answers given by the interviewees in the present study. More experiences from various walks of life and a bigger group of interviewees would be needed to gain generalisable understanding about how cultural differences may be present in everyday life.

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