

Nursing Students' Intentions, Reasons, and Impediments Regarding English Communication With Foreign Co-workers

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Abstract : An increase in the number of foreign healthcare workers in Japan has made second language workplace communications more likely. This research investigated whether pre-service nurses would be willing to engage in English communication with foreign co-workers. It also surveyed the reasons for and impediments to those interactions given by the students. The results of this study will be of use to those involved in both healthcare education and hospital administration.

Key words : second language, communication intentions, Japanese healthcare

Introduction

Faced with an aging population, along with a declining workforce, Japan is engaged upon a program of rapid expansion in the number of foreign healthcare workers it admits to the country. An increase in foreign employees will undoubtedly lead to linguistic challenges within the healthcare sector as first language (L1) Japanese speakers interact with those workers. This research focussed on L1 Japanese pre-service healthcare workers studying in Japan. It surveyed the intentions of these students regarding second language (L2) use in the workplace and their reasons for or impediments to engaging in L2 interactions.

Due to the designation by the Japanese government of nursing care as an area requiring proactive acceptance of visa applications (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2019), there are plans to admit up to 60,000 foreign healthcare workers within the current 5-year period. Working towards the successful integration of these workers into the Japanese system will require considerable effort on both sides, and the role of linguistic interactions in assimilating those workers will be crucial. Therefore, the opinions towards L2 communication among workers in this field need to be investigated in order to bring to light any potential issues.

Information regarding these opinions, and the reasons for and impediments to L2 interactions perceived by pre-service nurses, will be useful for both those involved in educating healthcare workers and those administering the institutions they work at.

Methods

A questionnaire was administered to a group of second-year nursing students at a medical university in Japan. The questionnaire was given via the use of Google Forms to ease data collection and to reduce the risk of viral transmission during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants were asked about their intention to communicate in English with potential future co-workers using a six-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. They were then asked to select all the reasons for and impediments to communicating with co-workers in English that applied to them from four options. Then they also had the opportunity of adding other reasons and impediments in a free-form answer section.

The items on the questionnaire were written in English before being translated into Japanese and checked by two L1 Japanese speakers. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. In total, 108 students provided responses. The results obtained are detailed below.

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Results and Discussion

The first set of results relate to the participants' intentions regarding L2 communication with co-workers. When asked if they would speak in English with a coworker, if given the chance, the following results were obtained.

Table 1
Intention to Communicate in L2 With Co-workers (%)

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Would speak if had the chance	0.9	3.7	13.9	43.5	27.8	10.2

Table 1 above shows that over 80 percent of the respondents agreed, to some extent, that they would communicate with a foreign co-worker in English if given the chance. These results are very encouraging and suggest that the pre-service nurses in this study are open to L2 communication in the workplace.

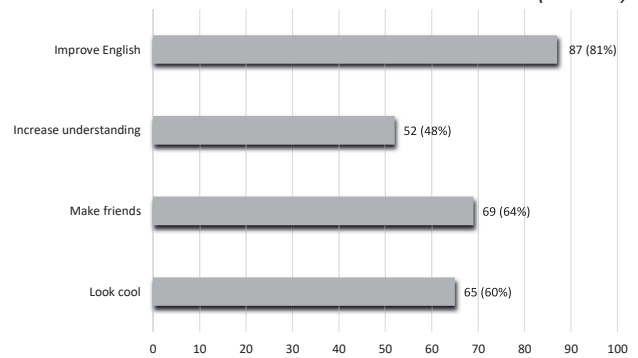
Intention to communicate in an L2 has often been equated with the willingness to communicate (WTC) construct in second language acquisition research (e.g. MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998). Previous studies have found significant correlations between WTC and actual communication behaviours in the Japanese context (e.g. Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, 2004).

These results also indicate that the students in this study tend to not hold negative feelings towards L2 communication with future co-workers. Under 20 percent of those surveyed expressed any disagreement whatsoever to the statement that they would speak to a co-worker in English if they had the chance. This suggests that, on the whole, most of the participants from this group are amenable to L2 interactions in the workplace.

The second set of results detail the reasons why the respondents would undertake L2 communication with co-workers. Participants were given four options within the questionnaire to select, they were also given the opportunity to input other reasons in a free-form answer section. The results for the four options are given below in Figure 1.

As can be seen in the chart above, the most common reason selected for engaging in L2 communication with foreign co-workers was to improve their English ability. This tallies with previous studies carried out in this context that found that instrumental factors, such as skill development, are often a key motivator for Japanese students (e.g. Irie, 2003).

Figure 1
Reasons for L2 Communication with Co-workers (n=108)



The next most selected reason was to make friends with their foreign co-workers. This suggests a more integrative form of motivation, where the learner views language as a medium for connecting with other groups (Gardner, 2001). A majority of the respondents, 60 percent, selected looking cool as a reason to communicate. While just under half, 48 percent, considered that increasing their understand of foreign cultures was a reason they would choose to communicate in English with a foreign co-worker.

There were some interesting reasons proffered by the students in the free-form section of the questionnaire. A translated selection are listed below.

Reasons for communicating in English with a foreign co-worker

I want to broaden my view of the world.

It's fun to talk to various people.

English is used all over the world, so it's useful.

I want to go beyond the 'Japanese' framework and speak with lots of people.

I don't have any English skills, but I think we can communicate as we speak.

Being able to speak English allows me to know the way of thinking and customs of people from other countries. If I can speak English when I work as a nurse, I will be able to take care of not only Japanese people but also people from other countries.

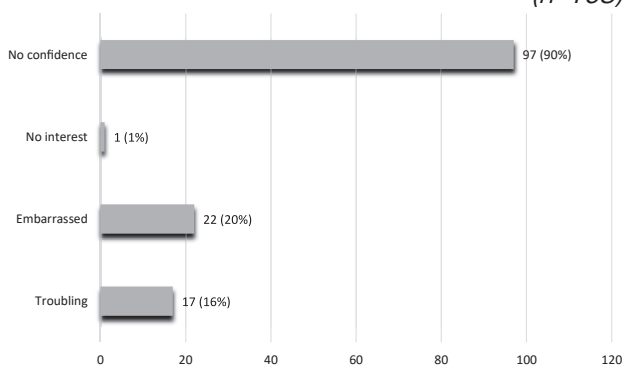
If I do not speak I will not be able to perform my work effectively.

As can be seen above, most of the reasons given relate to either the usefulness of English as a lingua franca, or the necessity of it for carrying out their professional duties. The role of English as a medium for international

communication has often been mentioned as a reason for developing English language skills (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2012). In this study it is interesting to note how some participants extended this to include L2 communication as a skill that will improve their ability to carry out their nursing duties.

The next section will look at the results derived from the part of the questionnaire that surveyed the participants' views on what would impede their L2 communication with co-workers. First of all, Figure 2 below shows the impediments selected by the participants from the four options listed.

Figure 2
Impediments to L2 Communication with Co-workers (n=108)



In contrast to the balanced results displayed within the reasons selected, the distribution of the impediment responses was much more pronounced. Almost all of the respondents, 90 percent, selected a lack of confidence in their English ability as an impediment to initiating L2 communication with foreign co-workers. Previous research in similar contexts has also found low levels of self-perceived confidence a hindrance to L2 communication (e.g. Tsuchiya, 2006). A thorough discussion of the underlying factors that combine to create these low levels of confidence is a complex topic beyond the scope of this study. However, on the basis of the limited data available in this case, it is clear that this is the overriding impediment to L2 communication, as self-assessed by the participants.

After lack of confidence, the second most selected impediment was that the respondent would feel embarrassed communicating in English with a co-worker. Embarrassment has also been found to be a factor in previous studies in the Japanese context (e.g. King, 2013). However, only 20 percent of the participants in this study considered it to be an issue. Even fewer, 16 percent, said that they would find L2

interactions with a foreign co-worker troubling. Finally, just one person selected the option that they were not interested in this type of communication.

The free-form section of the questionnaire again produced some thought-provoking responses regarding the impediments to L2 communication suggested by the participants. A translated selection is listed below.

Impediments to communicating in English with a foreign co-worker

- I cannot express myself well in English.*
- My English is not good enough.*
- Even if I have the ability to read English on my own, I'm not confident in my ability to converse with native speakers without difficulty. I'm worried that people might think my English is not good enough.*
- I'm not sure my English will be understood.*
- I get anxious when I think that the English I speak may not be understood by the other person. I would leave it to someone who is better at English than me.*
- I'm not very good at English and can't speak it. But I really want to communicate with foreign people.*
- I'm not good at English.*
- I think it's necessary and I'd like to speak it, but I don't have enough knowledge of English to do so.*
- I don't have any foreign acquaintances.*
- Foreigners are scary.*

Most of these comments reflect the fact that a lack of confidence was the most commonly selected impediment to English communication with foreign co-workers. The nursing students in this study tend to have a low self-perceived confidence in their own language skills. It is also notable that they are concerned that, even if they should attempt to converse in English, they will not be understood. Finally, it is noteworthy that some students expressed reservations towards L2 communication due to their lack of foreign acquaintances, or belief that foreigners are 'scary'. Xenophobic comments such as the second one are somewhat troubling. However, only one participant out of over a hundred made such a remark, and it is also possible that it was made in a light-hearted, jokey kind of way.

Conclusion

This study was intended to provide a preliminary investigation of nursing students' opinions regarding the L2 interactions they may encounter with foreign co-workers in their professional careers. The results suggested that they were open to such interactions and would be willing to engage in them if given the opportunity. Reasons given for this willingness included the desire to improve their English ability, a keenness to make foreign friends, and the belief that doing so would make them more effective healthcare providers.

Although the results and opinions were largely positive, impediments to L2 communication were also surveyed. By far the most common impediment suggested was the students' self-perceived lack of confidence. This is an area that could benefit from some pedagogical interventions. However, fostering confidence in language learners is an intractable problem that is not easily solved.

The relatively low number of participants limit the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn from this study. In the future, a larger study, containing groups of both pre-service and in-service nurses, could provide a more in-depth investigation of the topic. Additionally, if foreign healthcare workers could also be added to the study, a comparison between the two groups would prove insightful.

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