

# Pre-service Nursing Students' Views of Second Language Interactions in the Workplace

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**Abstract :** An influx of foreign healthcare workers to Japan has the potential to create linguistic challenges within workplace settings. This study surveyed the perspectives of pre-service nursing students regarding second language use in the workplace. The results obtained showed that the participants held favourable attitudes towards such communication, however, further investigation is necessary to see if such interactions are feasible.

Key words : second language communication, student attitudes

## Introduction

Japan is currently engaged in a program of rapid expansion in the number of foreign healthcare workers employed at its medical facilities. This increase will undoubtedly lead to linguistic challenges within the healthcare sector as first language (L1) Japanese speakers interact with those workers. This research focussed on pre-service nursing students in Japan, and surveyed their attitudes towards second language (L2) use with possible co-workers in their future work environment. The results of this research have useful implications for both language education and the integration of foreign workers into the Japanese healthcare system.

The Japanese government has designated nursing care as an area requiring proactive acceptance of visa applications (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2019). It plans to admit up to 60,000 foreign healthcare workers within the current 5-year period. The successful integration of these workers into the Japanese system will require hard work on both sides, and the role of linguistic development in those efforts will be critical. Although the foreign workers will be expected to be proficient enough in Japanese to operate effectively in their workplaces. There will undoubtedly be occasions when L2 communication is necessary or preferred, especially in social contexts. Therefore, the attitudes and intentions towards L2 communication among workers in this field need to be investigated in order to bring to light any potential issues.

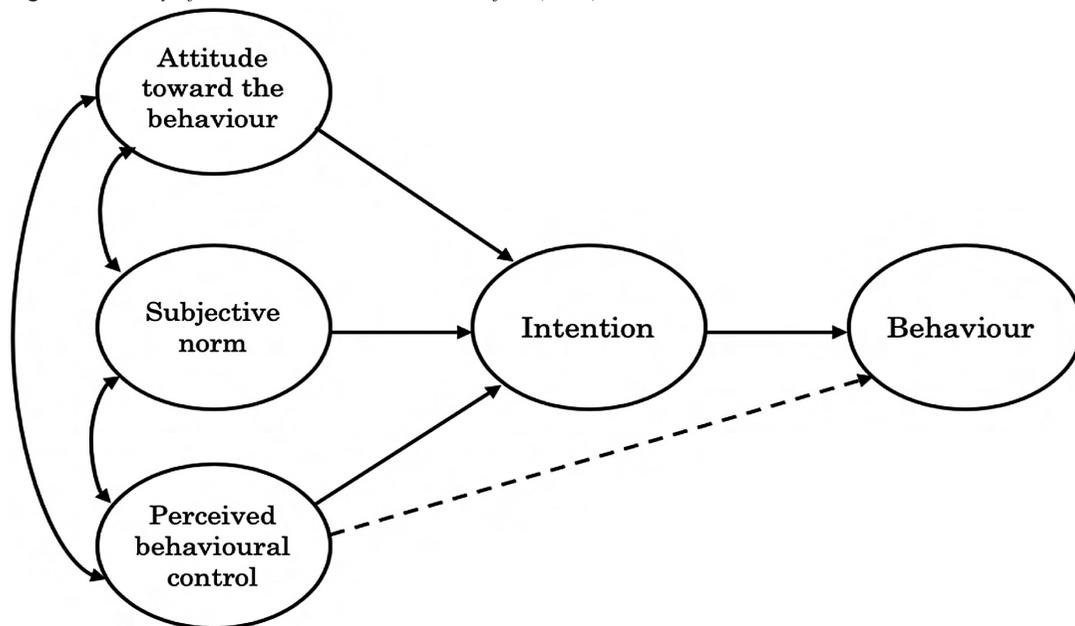
## Literature Review

This research addressed this need by surveying pre-service students in Japan, to better understand the perspectives they hold regarding L2 communication. The theoretical background of this study is based upon the reasoned action approach to behavioural modelling. Specifically, the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) will be utilized (Ajzen, 1991). There is a wealth of data created by over 30 years of studies that point to its effectiveness for investigating the relationships between attitudes and intentions for goal-directed behaviours (Ajzen, 2012). In this case, the behaviour under investigation is L2 communication with

co-workers by healthcare workers. Although this study does not analyse the links between the parts of the model, it will offer a preliminary investigation of the underlying factors at play.

The TPB developed from earlier work on models that posited a reasoned action approach to the study and prediction of human behaviours (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). These models operate on a cognitive understanding of attitudes. That is, beliefs are formed through cognitive processes, either consciously or sub-consciously. Three distinct factors—attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control—combine within the TPB model to create behavioural intention (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1 *Theory of Planned Behaviour Based on Ajzen (1987)*



Intentions are defined as capturing “the motivational factors that influence a behavior” (Ajzen, 1991, p.181). Attitudes towards the behaviour are a product of salient beliefs regarding the behaviour, and the strength with which those beliefs are held to be positive or negative with regard to the possible outcomes of those behaviours. Similarly, subjective norms result from normative beliefs about the behaviour, what important social referents such as friends or family think about an action and how closely the individual wants to align with those opinions. The degrees to which those beliefs affect behavioural intent are then a factor of the perceived social pressures involved in conforming, or not conforming to the beliefs, and the desire to comply with those pressures. Perceived behavioural control is a measure of the individuals reckoning of their ability to perform the behaviour. In addition to acting as a predictor of intention, perceived behavioural control also has a direct impact on actual behaviour, in terms of how much actual control an individual has over the behaviour, and how realistic their own estimation of their level of control is.

The TPB has often been used in previous studies to investigate health and lifestyle related behaviours (see Godin & Kok, 1996). Its use for communication behaviours has mainly been through its adaption into the willingness to communicate (WTC) construct (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998). However, the instruments used to measure WTC have been suggested to be unsuitable for the Japanese context due

to their reliance on self-reported communication behaviours. Furthermore, the WTC construct itself has been questioned for its inclusion of factors such as personality, which move the focus onto the individual rather than the behaviour being investigated (Hoggard, 2020).

## Methodology

This study took place at a medical university in Japan. All the participants were second-year students in the nursing department. Second-year students were selected as they have had more time to develop an identity as a medical professional than first-years fresh out of high school. Additionally, scheduling issues made it difficult to gain access to a sufficient number of third or fourth-year students to provide a robust dataset. Questionnaires were used to assess the students' views and attitudes regarding L2 use. In this case, the L2 the participants were asked about was English. These questionnaires were administered via the use of Google Forms. This option was utilised to simplify data collection and to reduce the risk of viral transmission during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Six-point Likert scales were used for the questionnaire items. This prevented the respondents from taking a neutral position. Four items were used to measure each of the three factors investigated—attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. All the items were translated from English to Japanese and checked by two L1 Japanese speakers. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. An explanation of the aims and objectives of the research was given prior to distribution of the QR codes linking to the questionnaire. Students who did not wish to participate were instructed not to scan the codes. Furthermore, the students were again informed in writing at the beginning of the questionnaire of the aims and that participation was not a requirement. In total, 108 students completed the questionnaire. The results for the individual items and scores for the combined scales are given in the next section.

## Results

Attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control regarding L2 communication with prospective future co-workers from abroad were each measured with four questionnaire items. The respondents had to choose from 1 ~ Strongly disagree to 6 ~ Strongly agree.

As can be seen in Table 1 below, the participants expressed positive attitudes towards L2 communication with co-workers. Just under 90 percent agreed to some extent that communication with a co-worker in English would be fun. Less than 2 percent answered that it would not be useful, and over 90 percent believed that it would be interesting. Although a considerable number of students thought that communicating with a co-worker in English might be scary, the majority of them did not.

These results indicate that the respondents in this study possessed attitudes towards English communication that are encouraging in terms of the implications they may hold for future workplace-based L2 interactions. In particular, as almost 60 percent of them strongly believed that using English with their future co-workers would be useful, it is clear that they are cognisant of the value of L2 communication skills.

**Table 1** *Attitudes Towards L2 Communication with Co-workers (%)*

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Would be fun	1.9	1.9	6.5	24.1	34.3	31.5
Would be useful	0	0	1.9	7.4	31.5	59.3
Would be interesting	0.9	2.8	1.9	23.1	29.6	41.7
Would be scary	8.3	16.7	26.9	36.1	8.3	3.7

The results for the items measuring subjective norms are shown below in Table 2. A very large proportion, almost 90 percent, of the respondents indicated that they believed their friends would be impressed if they communicated with co-workers in English. However, the results were not as emphatic when the opinions of senior colleagues and bosses were considered. Less than a quarter of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that their senior colleagues would want them to use English with their colleagues, or that their bosses would expect them to. Conversely, over 80 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that people would think it strange if they communicated in English with their co-workers.

These results suggest that, although the students sense encouragement from their peers and colleagues to use English, that feeling is not nearly as strong when viewed from a professional standpoint.

**Table 2** *Subjective Norms Regarding L2 Communication with Co-workers (%)*

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Friends would be impressed	0.9	3.7	6.5	37	34.3	17.6
Senior colleagues would want me to	0.9	5.6	19.4	52.8	17.6	3.7
Bosses would expect me to	0.9	4.6	24.1	45.4	18.5	6.5
People would think it strange	50	32.4	14.8	1.9	0.9	0

Table 3 below shows the results of the items relating to perceived behavioural control. It is very clear that this is an area where the students are lacking in self-belief. Just over 10 percent of the respondent agreed that they knew enough English to chat socially with their co-workers. Less than 1 percent expressed any level of agreement that they could discuss work-related topics in English. Furthermore, under 7 percent of the participants said that they were confident in their English ability. Over 80 percent did not believe that they could speak in English without becoming nervous.

The low levels of perceived behavioural control regarding English communication suggest that this is an area that requires special attention in order to prepare students to operate successfully in a multilingual workplace.

**Table 3** *Perceived Behavioural Control of L2 Communication with Co-workers (%)*

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Know enough to talk socially	27.8	28.7	31.5	5.6	5.6	0.9
Know enough to discuss work	43.5	34.3	21.3	0.9	0	0
Confident in my ability to talk	42.6	28.7	22.2	5.6	0.9	0
Can do without becoming nervous	22.2	34.3	26.9	10.2	5.6	0.9

After looking at the individual items above, I will now present the results for the three factor scales. As mentioned previously, each item had a range of responses from 1 ~ Strongly disagree to 6 ~ Strongly agree. Therefore, a mean of 3.5 or above would indicate the students generally agreed with the statement. Two items on the scale were negatively worded and therefore needed to be recoded before aggregating the scores into scales. Each of the scales contained four items.

**Table 4** *Scale Reliability and Mean Scores*

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Mean Range
Attitude	.76	4.76	3.69 ~ 5.48
Subjective norms	.63	4.42	3.91 ~ 5.29
Perceive behavioural control	.87	2.13	1.79 ~ 2.45

Table 4 above shows that all of the scales proved reliable. The means of the scales also reinforced the impression gained from the individual item scores that attitudes towards using English to communicate with prospective future co-workers received the most positive responses. This was followed by subjective norms, which also gained a favourable score for the scale. Both of those scales averaged well over the midpoint of 3.5. Perceived behavioural control, on the other hand, averaged well under that.

## Discussion

The results detailed in the previous section raise some noteworthy points. First of all, the individual item and scale scores for the attitude related statements are very encouraging. The nursing students in this study believe that communicating with foreign co-workers in English would be fun, interesting, and useful. Considering the theoretical model of behaviour shown in Figure 1, it can be suggested that holding such a positive attitude regarding the behaviour will lead to motivational impulses toward actual behaviour.

Similarly, the results derived from the subjective norm items and scale showed that the opinions of peers and other social referents are likely to have a positive effect on the participants' intention to communicate in English with co-workers in the future. However, the lower scores for the senior colleague and

boss items would seem to suggest that they do not view L2 communication with co-workers as a key part of their work responsibilities. Another encouraging result was the overwhelming majority of the respondents who did not think using English to communicate with their co-workers would be viewed as being strange. This implies that the nursing students involved in this study would not consider L2 communication an unusual part of workplace interactions.

Despite the encouraging results received for the attitude and subjective norm related items, the perceived behavioural control levels of the students in regard to their English communication ability were very low. Although most nurses working in Japan cannot be expected to become confident enough in their English ability to have work related discussions, it would undoubtedly ease the assimilation of foreign workers if they were able to chat socially.

Previous studies have also found low levels of self-efficacy for English communication among Japanese university students (e.g. Ball & Edelman, 2018). The underlying reasons for this are beyond the scope of this study, however, these results do raise some issues that need to be covered.

If the students do not possess sufficient levels of self-efficacy regarding English communication with their co-workers, it is likely to impact upon both their intentions and actual behaviour. This is due to perceived behavioural control having a role in both the creation of behavioural intention, and the follow through of performing the action (see Figure 1). Therefore, even when students have positive attitudes and subjective norms towards communicating in English with a co-worker, low self-efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to successfully perform the behaviour may prevent them from ever attempting it.

Finally, it is also necessary to consider the underlying issues of English ability among the foreign nurses, and the likelihood of L2 interactions taking place in the workplace. While countries such as the Philippines have comparatively high English levels, other countries from which the foreign nurses are coming from do not. Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia all rank lower than Japan for English proficiency (Education First, 2020). Therefore, the question can be asked as to how likely it is for the foreign nurses to be proficient English speakers. Furthermore, prior to coming to Japan, the foreign nurses need to undertake between six and twelve months of Japanese language training (Japan International Corporation of Welfare Services, 2021). Consequently, once they arrive in Japan it is probable that they would attempt to practice and improve their Japanese skills, rather than using an L2 (English) that they are not as proficient in. This is even more likely during working hours when the nurses, both Japanese and foreign, are focussed on their official duties.

However, it is important to note that the nurses that come from abroad are not likely to be representative of the general population of their home countries. Rather, they are probably above average academically, and undoubtedly adept at L2 acquisition. Therefore, English may well provide a useful third option, especially in social settings, for communication between healthcare workers from differing L1 backgrounds.

## Conclusion

This study looked at pre-service nursing students' views regarding L2 use in future workplace settings. The participants reported positive attitudes and subjective norms towards these types of interactions. These results have encouraging implications for reducing the linguistic challenges faced by the healthcare sector in Japan due to the influx of foreign workers. However, the low levels of perceived behavioural control

demonstrated by the students suggest that positive attitudes and subjective norms may not provide enough of a motivational impulse to generate actual communication.

It should also be noted that the sample in this study was relatively small, and no advanced statistical analysis of the responses was conducted. As the questionnaire surveyed potential English L2 use, it is also debateable whether the foreign nurses would have sufficient levels of proficiency to engage in English interactions, even if the Japanese nurses were so inclined.

In the future, it would be useful to expand the survey to in-service healthcare professionals. This, along with an increase in participant numbers, would allow for a more in-depth picture of attitudes among healthcare workers in Japan, both Japanese and non-Japanese, towards L2 communications. It would also create a large enough sample size to perform statistical analysis in order to test the model.

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