

# **Dialogue between Native and Non-native Japanese Speakers for Relationship Building in Terms of the Social Function of Language**

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*Key words:* Elementary-level Japanese class, classroom activities, positive reply, interaction, holding meanings

This article suggests methods to enable non-native Japanese speakers (NNSs) in elementary-level Japanese language classes to acquire skills to develop a dialogue with native speakers (NSs) for building a mutual relationship as members of the same community. Dialogue, here, is defined as interaction in which participants share their daily life experiences and problems, and discuss how these experiences and problems influence them and hold meanings for them. Such dialogue is critical for NNSs who work socially in cooperation with NSs within a community. However, no study has addressed whether or how elementary-level Japanese learners can develop skills necessary for such dialogue. To answer these questions, this study analyzes actual dialogues between NSs and NNSs.

Participants in this study were international students in an elementary-level Japanese class (NNSs) and Japanese students (NSs). Both groups attend the same graduate school of science. The international students do not require Japanese language proficiency because they are allowed to conduct research and earn a degree using English. However, Japanese language skills are necessary for communicating with Japanese students in academic as well as social settings. For intellectual exchange as well as social networking, international students are required to communicate with Japanese students in Japanese with elementary-level proficiency.

Data studied includes dialogues carried out in four group discussions, each among 2 NSs and 2 NNSs, on the subject of what calls for improvement on campus. These dialogues were analyzed in terms of the social function of language shown by Bakhtin, which regards as important listeners' positive replies that facilitate mutual dialogical understanding. The dialogues were examined to ascertain if they resulted in interaction leading to building a relationship, and if so, how this process developed.

The results reveal that the NSs and NNSs collaboratively developed dialogues

that led to relationship building. The process was observed to include the following steps: one participant cited a problem observed on campus, shared his or her opinions with other participants, deepened the listeners' understanding about the problem, and discussed how the problems could influence them or hold meanings for them. This development was possible through interaction between the NSs and NNSs in the following ways. (1) To compensate for the NNSs' lack of language skills, both groups asked each other about what was not clear. Such questioning started active interaction and increased mutual understandings. (2) The NSs who agreed with the NNSs' views and ideas did not hesitate to show support, which in turn encouraged the NNSs to speak and become involved in the discussions. (3) The NNSs often gave examples to illustrate their problems' background and influence on their lives, and the NSs abstracted their examples and concluded the NNSs' ideas. This cooperation of the NSs and NNSs helped to elaborate their ideas and proceed with the dialogues.

The results indicate that NNSs and NSs can develop dialogues that build relationships using elementary-level Japanese. The skills necessary for engaging in such dialogues should be included in the language study curriculum especially for learners who are expected to work with NSs even when they have only elementary-level Japanese skills.

To prepare students for productive dialogue, this study offers some suggestions for Japanese language education. First, classroom activities should include lessons on how NNSs can practice starting a dialogue. This is required because the NNSs' starting a dialogue was found to be a key to its development. Both the NSs and NNSs easily responded to the NNSs' utterances by using simple sentences and elementary-level vocabulary. Second, teachers should invite NNSs to discuss their ideas in class and give comments to others, because the results of the analysis show that support from teachers and peers is instrumental in encouraging the NNSs to speak more and participate in the dialogue. Third, classroom dialogues should focus on topics related to campus life, and problems related to NNSs' daily lives to make the contents of communication as real as possible and build a mutual relationship among the NNSs. Fourth, educating the NSs in the techniques that were found effective in this study can also be useful in communicating with the NNSs at elementary-level.

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