

SHORT UTTERANCES IN JAPANESE LANGUAGE CONVERSATION AMONG JAPANESE AND MALAYSIAN TOURIST GUIDES

ROSLINA MAMAT , NORMALIZA ABDUL RAHIM,
HAZLINA ABDUL HALIM & FARAH TAJUDDIN
UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

Abstract

Aizuchi, feedback and insertion are the 3 important elements in a Japanese language conversation. Aizuchi and feedback can be categorized as short utterance. This paper discussed short utterance in a conversation between native speakers and non-native speakers of Japanese language based on writer's research findings. This is because in general, students of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) have problems in constructing a real-life conversation in Japanese language. This paper tried to analyze the conversational situation between two Malaysian tour guides and two Japanese tourists. The face-to-face conversation occurred when the tour guides brought the tourists to Aquaria KLCC (G1&T1) and Istana Negara (G2&T2). This research intended to expose the conversation between the culture of native speaker and non-native speaker as a reference to students who are learning Japanese language.

Keywords: *Aizuchi, conversation, tourist guide, Japanese, language*

SEBUTAN RINGKAS DALAM BUALAN BAHASA JEPUN DALAM KALANGAN PEMANDU PELANCONG JEPUN DAN MALAYSIA

Abstrak

Aizuchi, maklumbalas dan selitan adalah 3 elemen penting dalam bualan bahasa Jepun. *Aizuchi* dan maklumbalas boleh dikategorikan sebagai sebutan ringkas. Makalah ini membincangkan sebutan ringkas dalam bualan antara penutur asal dan bukan asal bahasa Jepun berdasarkan dapatan kajian. Ini kerana secara umumnya pelajar Universiti Putra Malaysia, sebagai sampel kajian menghadapi masalah dalam mengkonstruksikan situasi sebenar dalam perbualan Jepun. Makalah ini mengkaji situasi perbualan antara pemandu pelancong Malaysia dan dua pemandu pelancong Jepun. Perbualan bersemuka berlaku apabila pemandu pelancong membawa para pelancong ke Aquaria (G1 & T1) dan Istana Negara (G2 & T2). Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mendedahkan budaya penutur asal dan bukan asal sebagai rujukan kepada pelajar yang sedang belajar bahasa Jepun.

Kata kunci: *Aizuchi*, bualan, pemandu pelancong, Jepun, bahasa

Introduction

Short utterance can be found in the form of *aizuchi*, feedback and insertion. *Aizuchi* is the Japanese term for back-channeling or response. It shows that the listener is paying attention and is trying to understand the speaker (Roslina Mamat, 2004). Examples of *aizuchi* are like, *hai*, *ee*, *un*, *sou desune*, *soudesuka*, *hontou*, *hontouni*, *aa*, *ho*, *ha*, repetition of the current speaker's phrase or word and including body gestures such as nodding, eye contact and other body language (Roslina Mamat, 2004). Whereas in Malay language, examples of *aizuchi* are 'ya, ya', 'hmm', 'ya ka?', 'iya' dan 'ii' (Roslina Mamat et al., 2006). In fact, there is also *aizuchi* spoken by Malay people like 'saya', (if translated into Japanese language becomes 'watashi'-me or I, in English) which is not used at all by Japanese people.

According to the *Kamus Dewan* 4th edition (2005), a feedback is any information that is received as an answer to a question. According to the website japanese.about.com, "*The Japanese continuously use verbal as well as non-verbal signal (aizuchi) to indicate that they are following what is being said... A recent study of injected aizuchi such as "hai (Yes)" and "ee", "Sou desu ne (Yes, quite right)", "Naruhodo (I see)", found that it occurs every few seconds in*

an average Japanese conversation". Therefore it is clear that a feedback is a response which is different from *aizuchi* and carries the meaning *back-channel* in the English language.

Aizuchi and feedback is often the topic of conversational study because of its special character which is synonym to Japanese language. *Aizuchi* is frequently misunderstood as it is usually misinterpreted with the answer 'yes' in a discussion between native and non-native speaker.

In Japanese culture, the role of a speaker and a listener is equally important. The speaker conveys the meaning through language but the listener conveys the meaning through *aizuchi*. The conversation between the two people is controlled by the listener through *aizuchi* (Roslina Mamat, 2004). During an on-going Japanese language conversation, the speaker while talking, will look and wait for a signal from the listener in order for him to continue or not to continue the conversation, through *aizuchi* that is sent by listener. The listener waits for the speaker when he is at the last predicate of a conversation. It is clear that because Japanese language has many utterances which has uncertain connotation, the listener has to listen to the last predicate or sentence to know what the speaker really wants to convey.

In a conversation, the utterances *hai*, *un* and *ee* in the context of *aizuchi* (or even feedback) do not necessarily give the same meaning as printed in the dictionary. Due to this, it is rather difficult for us to interpret if the utterer's *aizuchi* agrees or not with the current speaker. *Aizuchi* will just acts as a continuer in a conversation. This is a normal phenomenon in a language society especially in a Japanese society, as one of the reasons of eloquence is to be friendly to fulfil the social target.

According to Tohoku University web-site, *aizuchi* is uttered when the listener receives a new information, when the listener feels surprised or sceptical about a new information, when the listener agrees with the current speaker, when the listener does not agree and when the listener wants to show respect to the current speaker.

Mizutani's research (1988) showed that a foreign speaker of Japanese language felt disturbed with the *aizuchi* utterance by the native speaker of Japanese language. In contrast, a native speaker of Japanese language assumed the foreign speaker did not understand what he was saying when his conversation was not supported with *aizuchi* by the foreign speaker. The foreign speaker who assumed *aizuchi* utterance is a disturbance to his conversation needed to further understand the character of Japanese language and Japanese culture. Therefore this paper tried to categorize if the utterance is an *aizuchi*, feedback or an intruding insertion.

Insertion and overlapping often occurs in a conversation during a turn-taking process. Insertion occurs when the listener states his agreement or objection while the current speaker is talking. When the current speaker stops talking due to an insertion by the listener, the listener's action is then considered as stealing turn and a form of disturbance (Kubota, 2001). On the other hand, if the current

speaker continues his talk without minding the listener's utterance and at the same time the listener stops talking, then the listener's action is considered as an insertion. However continuous insertion can also be considered as a disturbance if it can stunt the current speaker's utterance, (Shaw, 2000).

The objectives of the study were to identify and analyze the conversation between two Malaysian tour guides and two Japanese tourists in Malaysia.

Methodology

This paper attempts to give a comparison between *aizuchi* and feedback. In a real-life Japanese language conversation, there is also the element of insertion. Since the conversation built by the students is a structured conversation, therefore is no element of insertion in their conversation. However, in general the element of insertion in Japanese language among native speakers is also not as frequent as insertions in conversations among native speakers of other languages.

There are two types of utterance which are utterance to support and utterance to intrude. Intruding utterance by a listener in Japanese language is considered as a taboo. It can make the native speaker feel disturbed and can harm the continuing conversation.

Native Japanese language speakers in this research were two Japanese tourists (T1 & T2) while the two non-native speakers were two Malaysian tour guides of Chinese race (G1 & G2). The focus of this paper is the three main elements that are interrelated and confusing in the Japanese language conversation which are *aizuchi*, feedback and insertion.

This research was conducted on two Japanese tourists (T1 & T2) and two tourist guides (G1 & G2). The duration of the conversation was between one to one and half hour. During the recording, T1 and G1 were at Aquaria KLCC while T2 and G2 were in front of Istana Negara, and other places in Kuala Lumpur. The conversation was still on-going even though they had moved to a different location.

Their conversation was recorded and made transcription. *Aizuchi* was placed in bracket (), and feedback was written in a different line indicating that a turn-taking process had occurred. The comma sign ‘、’ or ‘、’ (in Japanese language roman writing and transcription interpretation) was to indicate that the utterance was not yet finished but was inserted or intruded by the listener. The ‘。’ or ‘.’ sign (in the transcription interpretation) indicated that the speaker's utterance had ended and he was prepared to give the talking turn to another party. The ‘...’ sign indicated that there was another utterance before or after the speaker's utterance but the researcher cut the extract to shorten the actual utterance which was not related with the problem presented. The ‘xxx’ sign indicated the utterance that could not be identified.

The utterance that was examined in this paper was the utterance in the form of an *aizuchi* or a feedback such as *hai*, *un*, *ee* and others in Japanese language. An Utterance is different from an *aizuchi* or a feedback based on their individual

function which is a continuer for *aizuchi*, and answer, agreement or re-question for feedback. Only after that, utterance that is used to insert or steal turn in talking can be seen.

What is meant with a feedback in this research is short utterance where it is usually confused with *aizuchi* utterance like *hai, un, ee* dan so on. Feedbacks other than those answers will not be taken into consideration in this paper. The same goes for the idea and the new topic that was mentioned as turn-taking to continue the communication will also not be taken into consideration. A Feedback and an *aizuchi* can be differentiated by looking at pause, voice tone, complete or not completed sentences and talking speed.

Results And Discussion

Aizuchi in Conversation

In the transcription data, it was found that all three elements which were feedback, *aizuchi* and insertion could be found in the conversation between the tour guides and tourists. G1 often created disturbance whereas G2 often made both a feedback and an *aizuchi*. The conversation between G1 and T1 went rather well but it was detected that T1's utterance was disturbed by G1's interjection.

The total number of *aizuchi* in the conversation between T2 and G2 was 123 times. The types of *aizuchi* were *aizuchi hai, aizuchi ha, aizuchi a, ho, un, ee, sou and oo*. There was also repetition of *aizuchi* and unclearly heard *aizuchi* as many as 2 times. What is meant by repetition of *aizuchi* was the utterance made by a listener which was repeated word or phrase mentioned by the current speaker. *Aizuchi hai* is *hai, hai hai* or *hai hai hai*. The same goes for *aizuchi ha, a, un, ee* and *sou* which can be repeated as many as 2 or 3 times. Other than that, there was an *aizuchi a* that was combined with the other *aizuchi*. The combination was *a sou nandesuka, a sou, a souuuuuuni, a sounandesuka* and those combined with a repetition *aizuchi* such as *a, yuuryou* and so on. The combined *aizuchi* was only uttered by the Japanese tourists. Repetition *aizuchi* that was uttered by G2 was also slightly different compared to *aizuchi* as uttered by T2. This showed that the local speaker was fonder of *aizuchi* which was more brief like *ee, hai, sodesune, un* and so on.

It was found that T2 uttered *Aizuchi* 88 times and G2 34 times. The total number *aizuchi* uttered by T2 was more than the total *aizuchi* by G2 because as a tour guide, the job of giving information regarding the places visited, resulted in a longer utterance by the tour guide G2 and simultaneously giving more chance for T2 to give *aizuchi*. G2 uttered *aizuchi* when T2 told his previous visit experience. Because of this, even though G2 only contributed 27.9% less than the total number of *aizuchi*, this total was not a small amount and gave a significant meaning in this research.

These findings did not only indicate that G2 is a tour guide who is more fluent in Japanese language but also understands in depth the characteristic of Japanese language especially regarding *aizuchi*. Even without G2 noticing, his knowledge

about the culture of language and Japanese society is abreast with his fluency in Japanese language. He gave out *aizuchi* in the correct places that was at the pause or after the current speaker's utterance unit.

The number of *aizuchi* that was uttered by G1 and T1 was 16 times. *Aizuchi* that was found in the conversation was *hai, un, a sou*, repetition, *a, ee, he, ha* and *so*. *Aizuchi* that was uttered by T1 while G1 was talking was 4 times through *aizuchi hai*, repetition, *aa* and *ha*. *Aizuchi* that was uttered by G1 while T1 was talking was 12 times through *aizuchi un, hai, aa, ee, he*, combined with *aizuchi a*, which was *a sou* and *sou sou sou*.

In the conversation between T1 and G1, *aizuchi* that was uttered by G1 is more than those by T1 because T1's utterance was longer than G1's utterance. When T1's utterance was longer, it required G1 to make more *aizuchi*. The long utterance was because T1 became excited when talking about his life in Japan befriending a Malay person, which till now is still in correspondence after losing contact for quite some time. From the point of *aizuchi*, G1 played the role of a good listener. Unfortunately G1 was insensitive during the communication and was 'listening' less to T1's story till a misunderstanding occurred. Through the transcription, it is seen that T1 was disappointed because his utterance was interrupted directly and spoiled his excitement. Even though G1's Japanese language proficiency was very good but his communication was a bit disrupted due to the insertion which was not at the appropriate place and also the misunderstanding of meaning by G1 who lacked in listening skill.

Feedback in Conversation

There were 21 utters by T1 in the form of feedback which are *aa, hai, a souka, a sou, sou, ee*, repetition, *ha* and *un*. G1 gave 23 times of feedbacks which were *un, hai, a sou, ee, aa, sou sou sou, he*, repetition, *sou* and *un sou sou*.

In the conversation between G2 and T2, there were 46 feedbacks consisting of the same utterance as *aizuchi* which was repetition, *souiukanji, soudesu, un, ee, hai, aa, a souna, a soudesuka, soudesune, ho* and *sou*.

Supporting Insertion

Below is the supporting insertion. G2 made an insertion to T2's utterance after one idea unit came out, which is where a pause takes place. G2 made an insertion by giving an idea or proposing the name of a place that he meant to T2, which was 'The Ship'. G2 inserted again because he wished to explain to T2 why the situation took place.

T2: Un. Janakatta XXX. Ano suteeki hausuno nakani jittoshita,
[un. Not xxx. Ano when in the steak house,

G2: The ship deshou?
[The Ship right?]

T2: ee. Zutto aruita mon dakara soko de haitte, kokode tabeyoukanato

omotte suteeki, de aruiteruto massaji (un) ni sasowaretato nee (un), ee,
ma, sorewa,

[ya. Because I was walking a lot I went in there, here I thought of
eating steak, when I started walking massage (un) invited nee (un), ee,
maa, that is,]

G2: narandearukara, ano misega,
[it's because it is lined up, that shop]

Below is the insertion done by T2. T2 inserted G2's utterance because he wished to confirm or to get more explanation from G2. Therefore there were three insertions that occurred between T2 and G2, not because of the disturbance but because of giving idea and asking for explanation.

G2: kyousouga hageshiidesukara,
[because the competition is very stiff,]

T2: un? Kyousou?
[un? Competition?]

Intruding Insertion

Below is the intruding insertion done by G1 to T1

T1 Chiisai sakanaga sukidesuyo. Demo,
[like to eat small fish. But,]

G1 Maguro taberu deshou. Nihonjinwa yappari sukideshou
[eat tuna fish, right? Japanese people definitely like, right?]

T1 Nihonjinmo iro iro imasu,
[even Japanese people are various,]

G1 Shashin torimasuka? Totte agemasu. Chiisai no houga suki...
[Would you like to take a picture? I will take for you. I prefer
small fish,]

T1 said that he likes small fish. The sentence continued with 'demo' indicating that he still wanted to continue his talk but G1 stole his turn by changing the topic that T1 wanted to talk about. At this stage G1 had only made two mistakes that is making an insertion and making a generalization about the character of Japanese people. In the next conversation, T1 took his turn by waiting for G1 to finish his utterance. T1 wanted to correct G1's perception towards Japanese people by saying 'nihonjinmo iro iro imasu' (even Japanese people have various types of people), but once again G1 stole his turn by changing the topic of the conversation.

In the conversation between two native speaker of Japanese language, the listener and speaker plays a role that is almost equally important. However in the two conversations above, G1 was the second speaker of Japanese language who did the insertion and the generalization. Although it was clear that T1 did not like the action, the writer must remind that in a Malaysian society, stealing turn is done to show friendliness. In our society, we try to get close to people that we have yet to know by showing our friendliness which sometimes can be misinterpreted due to the difference in culture. Japanese society practices the

'uchi' and 'soto' concept in their every relation with certain groups. Uchi and Soto may be interpreted as 'own people' or 'outside people'. And the writer has the opinion that in a relation between service provider and customer, Japanese people will always maintain that distance and border.

To sum up, the result of this research indicated that Malaysian licensed tourist guide have high Japanese language proficiency skill and knowledge about *aizuchi* whether directly or indirectly. Nevertheless, they must be more attune to the culture of a native speaker of Japanese language, since even though the conversation was a success, it left a sense of disenchantment to the native speaker (T1). This was because insertions seldom occur in a conversation among native speakers. The insertion done by the tourist guide was rather harsh without following normal practice of Japanese people who starts an insertion with an utterance *anou, ee* and so on. Insertion can be avoided if a student of Japanese language is more sensitive and gets a wide exposure in an actual conversation. The instructor should inform the student about the importance of *aizuchi*, feedback and insertion in Japanese language. This element is the cultural element in a Japanese language conversation, and the knowledge about it can help the student if they communicate with native speaker. The skill in listening which is to utter an *aizuchi* and the skill to talk which is by using the polite language and not to be straight forward is the benchmark to see if that person can converse well or not.

Conclusion

The study has implications for the Ministry of Tourism, tourist guides and researchers in Malaysia. It is hoped that the ministry will improve their Japanese curriculum based on the findings of this study. The paper also suggests that the tourist guides upgrade their knowledge not only on Malaysia but also on Japan for better communication.

In the future, the next research is to gather conversation data from level two and level three Japanese language proficiency students, to make a comparison with the data in this article. The research can also be expanded by making a comparison between conversation data before and after the students understand the usage of *aizuchi* and feedback and interjection to allow the Japanese language conversation more natural.

About the authors

Dr Roslina Mamat, **Associate Professor Dr Normaliza Abdul Rahim**, **Dr Hazlina Abdul Halim** are lecturers at the Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Language and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. **Farah Tajuddin** is a Language Instructor at the same Department. They can be contacted respectively at the following email: roslina@fbmk.upm.edu.my, drnormaliza@gmail.com, nina@fbmk.upm.edu.my, farahtaj@fbmk.upm.edu.my

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