

# Learning L2 Japanese “Politeness” and “Impoliteness”: Young American Men’s Dilemmas during Study Abroad

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## ABSTRACT

Interviews conducted in English with four male second language (L2) learners of Japanese who studied abroad for an academic year illuminated the dilemmas they experienced during their social interactions in Japan as young American men. Dilemmas arose from within themselves and from the expectations and perceptions that native (L1) Japanese speakers had of them. On the one hand, some of the L2 learners felt discomfort with the so-called “polite” *desu/masu* forms that they associated with social distance, which appeared to be incompatible with friendliness that is highly valued in politeness in American English. On the other hand, they felt that L1 Japanese speakers expected American men to act and speak informally and did not expect them to use *desu/masu* forms or other honorifics. Some L1 speakers also addressed them in the informal plain style in situations where the use of the *desu/masu* form is the L1 Japanese norm. At the same time, they were mostly deprived of the more manly “impolite” language commonly used among young Japanese men in informal settings. These learners’ use of the *desu/masu* forms or apparent overuse of the informal plain forms upon return can be construed as each learner’s own response to these dilemmas and their struggles in indexing their social identities through the speech styles.

## 1. Introduction

Second language (L2) learning during study abroad has been extensively studied in the past few decades; however, many aspects of students’ learning and experiences are little understood and yet to be explored. The current study was launched to further explore L2 learners’ acquisition of “politeness” in Japanese during study abroad by examining the learners’

in-depth accounts of their learning of “politeness.” During the process of analyzing the participants’ accounts of “politeness,” patterns emerged that shed light on the learners’ social identities and on the contextual-bound nature of politeness, which relate to recent shifts discussed in L2 pragmatics research, and thus became one of the primary foci of this study.

In L2 research, the consideration of the emic (learners’ viewpoint) perspective is increasingly prioritized in such theoretical frameworks as sociocultural theory, language socialization, and post-structuralism (see Swain and Deters 2007). Contextual and sociocultural factors along with individual learners’ agency and multiple identities are considered important. Both L2 use and learning are closely related to each individual’s histories.

Moreover, some previously taken-for-granted key constructs such as the “native speaker model” or “native norms” as the goal of instruction/learning and “appropriateness” are highly questioned. V. Cook (1999) urges L2 researchers and teachers to construe L2 users as legitimate speakers in their own right rather than a (failed) approximation of L2 monolingual native (L1) speakers. He maintains that by knowing more than one language, L2 users are naturally different from L1 monolingual speakers. Further, validity of a “native norm” is questioned because L1 monolingual speakers’ verbal behaviors vary greatly among each other and also because language is diachronically fluid. L1 speakers make (at times marked) language choices to project their desired image in a given context. Dewaele (2008) contends that L2 users may not necessarily act “appropriately” even if they develop judgments of appropriateness as they socialize into a new language/culture; they also make choices to conform or not to conform to what they believe is appropriate.

There has also been a significant move that concerns L2 pragmatics studies—a paradigm shift in politeness research seen in discursive approaches that considers relational work (Locher and Watts 2005, Locher 2006; see Pizziconi 2006 for an overview of historical developments in politeness research). Crucially, there is no dichotomy between politeness and impoliteness, and no linguistic forms are inherently polite. Politeness and impoliteness as social practices are embedded in daily interactions, and they rely on interactants’ assessments of norms of appropriateness that are historically constructed by each individual. Verbal interaction thus entails a “discursive struggle

over what is deemed by individuals to be polite” and “individuals evaluate certain utterances as polite against the background of their own habitus” (Locher and Watts 2005: 29).

The current study shows that L2 users’ accounts with regard to politeness, appropriateness, and their language choices indeed corroborate the premises of these paradigm shifts. Below, studies that concern L2 learners’ acquisition of formal and informal language during study abroad and those that are related to Japanese “informal” and “formal” language are first reviewed (the latter represents some reconceptualization of the speech styles in Japanese), before presenting the current study.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Formal vs. informal language use during study abroad

It has been found that L2 learners who study abroad learn more informal language during their stay than formal language (see Kasper and Rose 2002 for review). L2 learners’ languages upon return are often characterized as displaying an overuse of informal language or a haphazard mix of informal and formal language. For instance, Irish learners of German switched between the two address forms of “you” (“intimate/simple” *du* and “polite/distant” *Sie*) haphazardly within a turn after studying in Germany for 10 months (Barron 2006), and English-speaking French learners overused informal *ne* deletion in negatives after one academic year in France (Regan 1995). L2 Japanese speakers were also reported to overuse the informal style (generally referred to as “plain” style) after studying abroad (Marriott 1993, 1995).

Recent studies, however, revealed that L2 learners sometimes choose not to conform to the norms despite their knowledge of the L1 norm. In Kinginger and Farrell’s study (2004), for example, advanced learners of French whose L1 is English deliberately diverged from the norm in their use of *tu*, the informal “you,” or *vous*, the formal “you” to express their identities. One of their participants, Benjamin, reserved his right to use *vous* in informal interaction, and another participant, Bill, suggests that his overuse of *tu* may mark his personality, stating “I think I am a little too happy. I don’t *vous* as much as I probably should. I don’t guard the *vous*” (Kinging and Farrell 2004: 33). Matsumura (2007) studied advice-giving strategies of Japanese-speaking L2 English learners who studied in Canada. After study abroad, in L2 English the learners chose an advice-giving strategy towards higher-status individuals that they

knew diverges from the L1 norm (i.e., opting out by saying nothing to a professor). According to Dewaele (2008), such conscious deviation from the L1 norm is one of the alternatives that L2 users take (the other alternatives being the avoidance of interactions that may lead to inappropriate behaviors and accommodation to the L1 norm to achieve the desired perlocutionary effects).

L2 Japanese learners are also found to make pragmatic choices that they know diverge from the L1 norm. Ishihara and Tarone (2009) conducted a case study on L2 Japanese speakers' subjectivity leading to their pragmatic choices in such speech acts as requesting, refusing, and responding to compliments. They found, for example, that one of the participants, Mark, provided a personal reason for refusing a boss's invitation, which he knew may not be considered appropriate in Japan (where he believed one's personal life is secondary). He made such a decision because he did not want to "give [him]self up" (114). Another student, Tim, used overly polite expressions such as *gozonji desu ka* "Do you know?" in playing the role of a boss inviting his employee to a party. This was because of his (initial) rejection of "unfair" hierarchical relationships in Japan which he believed was reflected in L1 Japanese speakers' use of language. Further, as discussed below, it has been found that L2 Japanese learners studying abroad (having studied abroad), who often overuse the plain style, have also been making deliberate decisions.

## 2.2. Plain and "polite" *desu/masu* styles in Japanese

The choice between the "polite" *desu/masu* and plain styles is a salient feature of the Japanese language. In speaking or writing Japanese, one constantly needs to make a decision as to whether to use the plain or *desu/masu* predicates in matrix and some subordinate clauses unless they opt for incomplete sentences. This is because all predicates end with either the *desu/masu* or plain form as seen in the nominal predicates in (1) and verb predicates in (2).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. *Kyō wa kin'yōbi da.* 'It is Friday.'  
today TOP Friday COP-NONPAST  
b. *Kyō wa kin'yōbi des-u.* 'It is Friday.'  
today TOP Friday COP-AH-NONPAST
- (2) a. *Ame ga yoku fur-u.* 'It often rains.'  
rain NOM often fall-NONPAST  
b. *Ame ga yoku furi-mas-u.*  
rain NOM often fall-AH-NONPAST

In (1a) and (2a), the plain form of the copula *da* and that of the verb *fur-u* ‘fall’ are used. In (1b) and (2b), the copula *des-* and the *mas-* form of the verb *fur-u*, which are generally understood to be addressee-honorific (and glossed as AH), are used. It should be noted here that although the *desu/masu* form is often called the polite form or addressee honorific form, there is increasing awareness that the meaning this form indexes is not always politeness, despite the dominant linguistic ideology that this form indicates politeness, as discussed below. Hence, the form will be referred to as the *desu/masu* form rather than “polite form” below.

Japanese textbooks for L2 learners typically introduce the *desu/masu* form early and do not introduce the plain form until much later, and the descriptions of the use of these forms are oversimplified (H. M. Cook 2008, Matsumoto and Okamoto 2003). When they introduce the plain form, it is often introduced as a form required in certain linguistic environments as shown in (3). In these constructions the plain form *furu* (in the embedded clause) does not index any social meanings, and the *masu* form in the main predicates such as *omoi-masu* and *i-masu* determine the style and index social meanings.

- (3) a. *Ame ga furu to omoi-mas-u.* ‘I think it will rain.’  
rain NOM fall COMP think-AH-NONPAST
- b. *Ame ga furu hi wa uchi ni i-mas-u.*  
rain NOM fall day TOP home LOC stay-AH-NONPAST  
‘On days when it rains, I stay home.’

According to H. M. Cook’s (2008) analyses of six textbooks commonly used in the United States, the *desu/masu* form is over-emphasized in most of the textbooks. For instance, example dialogues in many textbooks, including those that are conversations between college students, are almost all in the *desu/masu* form. In reality, college students are likely to use *desu/masu* when they first meet or in formal settings such as the classroom, but otherwise, they are more likely to speak to each other in the plain style.

In spoken language, the form in (1a, 2a) is generally considered to indicate informality and to be used with an addressee with whom the speaker feels close, while the form in (1b, 2b) is considered to indicate formality, and to be used mostly with an addressee with whom speakers feel socially or psychologically distant. Japanese also has reference honorific expressions as shown in (4c–d). In (4a–b), the verb *ik-u* is shown in the plain (4a) and *desu/masu* form (4b). In (4c), a humble verb

*mair-u* lowers the speaker's own action; in (4d), the respectful verb *irasshar-u* raises the addressee or the third party's action to express deference towards the referent.

- (4) a. *Iku*. '(I) will go.'  
 b. *Iki-masu*. '(I) will go.'  
 c. *Mairi-masu*. '(I) will go.'  
 d. *Irasshai-masu*. '(S/he) will go.'

Japanese speakers constantly make decisions between the two forms shown in (1–2) and (4a–b) by considering various social and contextual factors even if the use of the polite verbs as in (4c) and (4d) may not be called for on a daily basis by college students.

However, this description is prescriptive, reflecting the dominant linguistic ideology. In actual language use, the choice between the plain and *desu/masu* is not bound to certain contextual factors. Both plain and *desu/masu* forms have multiple social meanings, and L1 speakers shift between the two forms both in formal and informal contexts in order to indirectly index social meanings and construct their social identities (H. M. Cook 1999, 2008, Okamoto 1999, Makino 2002, Maynard 1993). In informal contexts such as at dinnertime at home, mothers switch to *desu/masu* to index their roles of authority and responsibility, and host families switch to *desu/masu* to index their teacher voices in order to teach L2 learners staying with them (H. M. Cook 2008).

In formal situations where students or younger speakers are expected to use *desu/masu* due to their social status or younger age, speakers switch to the plain style to display empathy, emotion, inner thoughts or self-conviction (H. M. Cook 2006, Ikuta 1983, Makino 2002, Maynard 1993, Okamoto 1999). Such style shifts help speakers construct their social identities and co-construct relationships with their interlocutors. In H. M. Cook's (2006) study, for example, a student in an academic consultation session not only shifted his style from *desu/masu* to the plain form for his self-conviction, but he also shifted his style when co-constructing an idea with a professor by continuing the sentence that the professor started. H. M. Cook argues that co-constructing sentences can serve as a strategy for a student to obscure the hierarchical relationship in the academic setting and make it a more mutually professional relationship.

To better explain the multiple social meanings of *desu/masu* forms observed in previous studies, H. M. Cook (2008) suggests that what *desu/masu* forms directly index is a self-presentational stance, and that politeness is one of many social meanings that the form indirectly indexes. From this perspective, she conducted a study on L2 Japanese learners' and their Japanese host families' use of the *desu/masu* form (to be summarized below). There are also a few other L2 Japanese studies that reflect similar perspectives by considering the *desu/masu* and plain forms' multiple social meanings and their relation to social identities, which speakers construct based on their understandings of social meanings that they learned through language socialization.

Siegal (1994) conducted an ethnographic study on four Western women in Japan, two of whom were students studying abroad: Sally from Britain and Arina from Hungary. They both negatively evaluated Japanese women's polite language. In response, Sally preferred the plain style and overused it. Arina used *desu/masu*, but stayed away from other honorifics, which she found excessively polite and redundant. Siegal observed that:

Sally is mindful that men are "allowed" to use the plain form of the verb more often than women and when talking to strangers; also she was aware that she needed to use the polite forms or honorifics to speak with people above her, or older people. Still, she preferred the plain form because it was "friendly." (Siegal 1994: 339)

Siegal (1994) also made some important observations that corroborate often heard anecdotes. First, language expected of non-Asian foreigners is different from what is expected of L1 speakers. According to Siegal, some language learners and Japanese language teachers believe it is not necessary for foreigners to learn the honorific system. She noted that during her observation of an advanced level Japanese language classroom, one professor told the students "you're foreigners and you don't need to worry about using honorific language" when a Western woman asked a question about honorific usage (1994: 363). Second, being a foreigner and being treated as a foreigner influences the types of interactions that L2 learners encounter. Siegal demonstrates this by reporting her observations of Sally's and Arina's interactions with clerks at travel agencies. Though an agent who Arina interacted with used polite language (e.g., *Sukoshi o-machi kudasai* "please wait a minute," [Siegal 1994: 220]), an agent who Sally interacted with did not

consistently use the polite language expected of agents towards their clients (e.g., *chotto matte ne* “Wait a minute *ne*,” [Siegal 1994: 224]), which could be partially attributed to the fact that the former agency serves the general public and the latter serves university students, but also to other factors such as Sally’s language (e.g., her use of the plain form), appearance, and demeanor.

Both of these factors, the differential expectations towards non-Asian foreigners’ language and interactions that diverge from L1 norms, are bound to affect L2 learners’ language. Siegal argues that learners develop their own style, due partially to difficulties with register variation, but also because they choose to speak in one kind of style to assert their difference in order to reproduce their foreigner status.

The observation that the interaction L2 Japanese learners encounter in Japan may be different from what is expected by L1 norms highlights the need to examine the kinds of interactions and experiences that L2 learners have in Japan. Among interactions that L2 learners often encounter are those with host families, which is a popular accommodation choice when studying abroad. Iino (1999, 2006) examined a dinnertime interaction at a host family in Kyoto and found that the host family used “unnatural” language (i.e., language that deviates from L1 norm) when addressing L2 learners in an attempt to use an ideal language that they believed was easier for L2 learners to understand.

H. M. Cook (2008) examined dinnertime interactions between nine L2 learners and their host families and analyzed the use of the plain and *desu/masu* forms. The predominant speech style at home was the plain style; yet, host family members’ tacit knowledge of style shifts was apparent. For instance, host mothers switched from the plain to *desu/masu* form when providing information about dinner as the “person in charge.” Through observation of the style shifts and participation in interaction, L2 learners appear to acquire the social meanings of these forms through implicit socialization. There was also some evidence that the learners also learned to shift styles (e.g., shifting to *desu/masu* to index a presentational stance as a presenter or as the authority on the English language). There was both evidence of implicit socialization and explicit socialization with regard to *desu/masu* (e.g., the host family’s modeling of how L2 learners should talk outside—how to call a restaurant to make a reservation). In terms of L2 learners’ use of the plain style at home, H. M. Cook suggests that “the more socialized



learners become, through interactions with host families and other native speakers of Japanese, the less frequently they make marked choices when speaking with their host family” (H. M. Cook 2008: 146). This is based on her observation that advanced speakers employed less marked uses of the plain form than less proficient speakers in her data. Interestingly, however, the learners did not seem very aware of the speech styles that their host families were using. Because H. M. Cook’s study focused on interaction in the homestay context, the advanced L2 speakers’ language in formal contexts was not assessed, and it is not clear if they displayed an overuse of the plain style in formal contexts after studying abroad.

Iwasaki (2010) conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses on five English-speaking male L2 Japanese learners’ Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) data. Such interviews are situations in which predominant use of *desu/masu* is the norm. The learners’ OPIs before and after they studied in Japan were compared. She found that all five mixed their styles in ways that can be mostly explained by multiple meanings of these forms. It was also found that two learners who appeared to have overused the plain style after studying abroad maintained their ability to use *desu/masu* (as observed in role plays) and consistently shifted to *desu/masu* when asking the interviewer questions or making requests. Hence, the apparent overuse of their plain style was attributed to the L2 learners’ choices of styles based on the social meanings they acquired through socialization during their stay abroad. But how these five learners’ differential uses of the styles reflect their interactions and socialization in Japan was not investigated. Because these five learners were non-Asian male foreigners from the United States, their experiences might have diverged from what Siegal (1994) reported about the four female Westerners.

Previous studies have reported that male and female students’ experiences during study abroad in countries such as Russia and Costa Rica are very different (see Block 2009 for a summary). Though much of the previous study abroad research on gender-related issues focuses on sexism or harassment that female L2 learners experience, Kinginger and Farrell Whitworth (2005) suggest the need for “a relatively nuanced account of the role of gendered activity as it shapes emotional investment in language learning during study abroad” (1). They found, for example, that confrontation with French gendered practice while studying in France resulted in alienation from social context for one of the female

students, contributing to her rejection of emotional investment in L2 French learning.

Revealing English-speaking L2 Japanese learners' perspectives and experiences in Japan seems particularly important because the conception of 'politeness' is found to differ between L1 Japanese and L1 English speakers. Ide *et al.* (1992) and Pizziconi (2007) compared L1 Japanese speakers' and L1 English speakers' conceptualization of politeness using key terms associated with politeness such as "polite," "considerate," "respectful," and "friendly," among others, albeit through employment of different elicitation techniques. Ide *et al.* found that a dimension of "friendliness" was clustered with other adjectives among American English speakers, but that it was qualitatively different from almost all other adjectives among Japanese speakers. Likewise, Pizziconi found that though British English and Japanese speakers' responses were fairly similar, they differed in their preference for detail in relation to nuances of "friendliness." English speakers' politeness entailed "informal," "friendly" nuances while Japanese entailed ones that were "reserved" and "modest." A question arises, then, as to how English speaking L2 Japanese learners deal with different (somewhat conflicting) conceptualizations involving "friendliness" and "politeness" when learning and using Japanese.

### **3. Current Study**

#### **3.1. Language socialization perspective**

Because the choice of the two styles (the use of plain forms or *desu/masu* forms) is closely connected to social roles and situations, socialization into the target language/culture plays an indispensable role in the acquisition of these styles as demonstrated in H. M. Cook's (2008) study. As learners use language and socialize into a new culture, they acquire language from expert language users through explicit (overt guidance) or implicit socialization by participating in routine activities—though we need to be mindful that the end point of L2 language socialization may differ from that of L1 because they may choose not to act like L1 speakers (Zuengler and Cole 2005).

In order for L2 learners to acquire language through socialization, opportunities to socialize in the new culture are essential. What matters most for L2 learning of pragmatics, however, appears to be "the *quality* of nonnative speakers' exposure and social contacts conducted in [the

target language]” (Kasper and Rose 2002: 196) and socialization in a wider range of contexts rather than the amount of social interaction.

Siegal (1994) has shown that interactions female foreigners encounter are different from those L1 speakers often encounter. Because differential expectations for language use by men and women are salient among L1 Japanese speakers, male foreigners’ experiences and interactions may diverge from female speakers’. Importantly, social interactions that young male L2 learners experience may differ greatly from what most Japanese language teachers imagine, especially because many Japanese teachers in the U.S. higher education system are female L1 Japanese speakers who are older than college students.

For these reasons, this study elicits four male L2 learners’ perceptions of politeness, the *desu/masu* form (vs. plain form) and experiences which shaped their views while studying abroad. It is to be acknowledged that the current study is limited in that it does not directly examine language socialization processes as they unfold and that the L2 learners’ views were elicited by interviews focusing on “politeness” rather than by more appropriate ways to examine emic perspectives such as in-depth interviews of the participants’ life stories or ethnographic observation (see Ricento 2005). Yet, it attempts to gain an understanding of language socialization through the L2 learners’ retrospective accounts.

The four participants are among the five L2 learners studied by Iwasaki (2010) whose proficiency levels and uses of the plain and *desu/masu* forms were assessed in detail. The number of participants is very small, but the importance of careful examination of a small number of L2 learners has been underscored by extensive variability observed in previous studies (DeKeyser 1991, Kinginger 2008, Wilkinson 2000, Block 2009), and the significance of such studies in elucidating social dimensions of study abroad in various domains has been evident (Kinger 2008, Pellegrino Aveni 2005).

### **3.2. Participants**

The four participants in this study were enrolled in a state university in North America when they studied abroad. When a call for participation in research was offered to all study abroad participants (11 men, 4 women) from this university in the year the study was initiated (2002), six male students aged 19 to 21 volunteered and participated in several assessments (reported in Iwasaki 2007, 2010). Four of them responded to a call for further participation by email and agreed to participate in the retrospective interviews conducted in March 2005 reported here.<sup>2</sup> They

are given the pseudonyms Greg, Alan, Peter, and Sam. Greg had studied Japanese for 1 year and the other three had studied for two years at the university prior to their departure. They went to three different universities in Japan to study for one academic year.<sup>3</sup> Alan and Greg studied in the same institution in Hyōgo, Peter studied in Ibaraki, and Sam studied in Tokyo.

Alan, Sam, and Peter used two volumes of *Yookoso!* by Tohsaku (1999a, b) and the first half of *An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese* by Miura and McGloin (1995). Greg only studied through the first few chapters of the second volume of *Yookoso!* Unlike some other textbooks that H. M. Cook (2008) surveyed, this textbook provides descriptions of the plain and *desu/masu* forms early on in the first volume. The plain form is described as the form “used when speakers address very familiar people on the same social level, such as close friends,” and *desu/masu* (called “polite form”) is the form “used, for instance, to address people with whom one is not well acquainted or to speak impersonally with in-group people (such as one’s superior)” (Tohsaku 1999a: 187). But the speech style in dialogues is predominantly in *desu/masu* style, and the plain form is primarily used in linguistic environments that require this form such as in embedded clauses, in which the form does not have any social meanings.<sup>4</sup>

Peter lived in a dormitory and actively participated in the kendo club activities. The other three lived with their host families. Both Sam and Greg extensively interacted with their host mother. For Greg, his host mother was the primary interlocutor. Sam also interacted extensively with his host mother, but he also participated in extracurricular activities on campus (a glee club) and outside (a local church choir). Alan did not interact with his host family as much as he had wished to, but he met and interacted with many Japanese speakers especially during his trips within and outside Japan. Table 1 summarizes the participants’ profiles.

Their OPI ratings before and after study abroad indicated that all four improved their proficiency during their study abroad as shown in Table 2. Though they all spoke predominantly in the *desu/masu* style in OPIs conducted by their teacher before departure, upon return Greg predominantly used the plain forms in an OPI conducted by the same interviewer.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the three others maintained their predominant use of *desu/masu* forms in the post-study abroad OPIs (Iwasaki 2010).

Pseudonyms	Years of instruction before SA	Where they studied in Japan	Living accommodation	Primary non-academic activities and interaction
Greg	1 year	Hyōgo	Homestay	Interacting with host family
Alan	2 years	Hyōgo	Homestay	Travelling and interacting with friends
Sam	2 years	Tokyo	Homestay	Church choir, glee club, interacting with host family
Peter	2 years	Ibaraki	Dormitory	Kendo club, interacting with other club members

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Pseudonyms	Pre-Study-Abroad OPI	Post-Study-Abroad OPI	Pre-SA primary speech style	Post-SA primary speech style
Greg	Intermediate-Low	Intermediate-Mid	<i>desu/masu</i>	plain
Alan	Intermediate-High	Advanced-Low	<i>desu/masu</i>	<i>desu/masu</i>
Sam	Intermediate-High	Advanced-Mid	<i>desu/masu</i>	<i>desu/masu</i>
Peter	Advanced-Low	Advanced-High	<i>desu/masu</i>	<i>desu/masu</i>

Table 2. Participants' language profiles

### 3.3. Procedure

Retrospective interviews were conducted in English over the phone approximately 1 year and 6 months after their post-study abroad OPIs, except for a part of the interview with Alan, who lived in the same state as the author. Greg was in Japan looking for an English-teaching job, Alan worked for a technology-related company based in California, Sam was in his home state exploring career options, and Peter was working as an English-Japanese translator at a company in New York.

It was after a rather long interval, and the obvious and major drawback was the possibility that their memories about their experiences in Japan had faded away and that their perceptions about the *desu/masu* and plain forms had changed. But crucially, as will be revealed in the results, not only did the four participants recall their experiences in detail, but also their accounts were compatible with their language use observed during their post-study abroad OPIs reported by Iwasaki (2010) (e.g., Greg, who claimed in the retrospective interview to have changed his default speech style to the plain form while in Japan, was in fact predominantly using the plain form in his post-study abroad OPI.) Further, there were advantages in conducting the interviews later. First, it

seemed easier for them to share their views freely with the author, who was their former Japanese language teacher, because they had graduated from the university. Second, their experiences recalled at this time were likely to represent those that had had lasting effects on them.

The interviews, conducted in English, were about 45 minutes to 1.5 hours long, and they were audio-recorded and transcribed. They were semi-structured around a set of prepared questions, taking advantage of the strengths of both structured and unstructured interviews (Fontana and Frey 2000) (Appendix 1). The interviews were conducted in line with the dominant linguistic ideologies that link *desu/masu* to politeness and that assume the native speaker model as the learners' target. Hence the readers may find a dissonance between the previous studies reviewed above and the ways the current study's interview questions are framed. Despite these assumptions on the interviewer's part, however, it is noteworthy that the learners' responses reported below (as well as their uses of *desu/masu* reported in Iwasaki 2010) shed light on the contextual nature of (im)politeness as well as the learners' own intentions and agency in their language choice, which consequently transformed the foci of this research.

The participants' responses are organized around Themes (a–f) below that were selected based on previous studies. The participants' responses related to Themes (a–d) help us understand their language socialization in Japan and (e–f) concern their observations and perceptions. In the participants' excerpts below, some parts of the participants' responses that are particularly pertinent to the discussions are underlined.

- (a) Contexts of language socialization
- (b) Male foreigner status
- (c) Making friends
- (d) Accounts of explicit socialization
- (e) The *desu/masu* and politeness
- (f) How they chose their speech styles

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Contexts of language socialization

All four actively socialized in Japan, but Sam's contexts of language socialization appear to be the most diverse. Sam attributed his understanding of formal language to his extracurricular activities (in addition to the class and his host family).<sup>6</sup>

Being in a club, especially in a church choir, helped a lot for my formal, formal speech in Japanese as well as the class. But um one big thing that helped me was, uh, I got, the reason why it helped so much was, I attended meetings, and um you know usually they use a lot of formal Japanese, uh, a lot of *keigo*, and also in email that they would send on the list. I know that helped a lot because I was reading emails almost everyday that came into the email list. (...) In the church choir, people almost always use formal, uh, polite Japanese and they would use a lot of *keigo* in that. Um, but on the other hand, a lot of time, in the club, the glee club, they would use less *keigo*. Um, mostly plain form, from what I could see [inaudible] casual. But, definitely like in meetings, whether it was the glee club, or the church choir, they would often use *keigo*, formal speech, definitely *desu, masu* but also, you know, very polite *keigo*, *itadakimasu, kudasaimasu* and all that.

Contrary to some college students' reports (including Greg in this study) that real Japanese people rarely or never use *keigo* (honorifics, which often refers to referent honorifics such as those shown in 4c–d), Sam observed an active use of honorifics such as humble *itadakimasu* 'to receive' and respectful *kudasaimasu* 'to give,' in addition to *desu/masu* during his extra-curricular activities. He also heard his host mother's use of what he calls "super *keigo*" when she was talking on the phone. Such instances made him feel the usefulness of honorifics when the speaker feels the need for it in a given context. His new association of *desu/masu* and other honorific language to the meetings—even among student club members, rather than to specific addressees—suggests his realization of the utility of *desu/masu* to index a presentational stance.

Peter's primary context of language socialization seems to have revolved around his kendo club, one of the formal athletic clubs. (Formal athletic clubs at Japanese universities are typically known to have rigid hierarchical structures between *senpai* "senior members" and *kōhai* "junior members.") He attributed his understanding of language registers to interactions with his fellow club members. For example, in response to the question about what helped him most to learn informal language, he said that interacting with *kōhai* helped him learn to use it.

Though Greg's language socialization outside of the classroom seems to be primarily limited to interactions with his host family, he actively participated in it and attributed much of his language learning in Japan to them:

I think it's probably [the] host family, [that is] important for learning a lot. You are in a situation where you really have to communicate something. If something's wrong, you have to work it out; you have to work it out in Japanese. I think that was the best thing. And also, we ran into a lot of things there that we didn't necessarily learn in class. (...) I think maybe not necessarily language, but a lot of cultural things, like, when something really means "no." That was briefly covered in class but until you've actually tried to work your way through something like that or other things sort of picking up cues or sort of mood of someone [you're] talking to. A lot of what classes are done to do is, they are designed to, transmit the facts, but emotions are very important. (...) It's kind of hard to pick up sort of nuances like that, unless you spend a lot time with someone.

It is noteworthy that he discovered that interaction at home helped him to express mood and emotion while the activities in the classroom were designed to 'transmit facts.' In trying to build desirable interpersonal relationships at home, he realized that it was not necessarily the information he conveyed that mattered, but the mood and emotion that was conveyed by the way he interacted with the host family. The speech style (whether to use the plain or *desu/masu* forms) must have undoubtedly played a role to co-construct relationships with his host family as shown by H. M. Cook (2008).

#### 4.2. Male foreigner status

Despite their observations that honorifics are extremely important among L1 speakers, Sam and Peter were fully aware that L1 Japanese speakers did not expect foreigners to use honorifics. When asked if learning honorifics is important, Sam stated:

I mean, to be honest with you, people probably wouldn't really expect a foreigner, they, you know they try to have a low expectation of foreigners learning Japanese. But, you know, I think it's important if you really want to do well.

Peter claimed that honorifics are important especially when one becomes a *shakaijin* (literally, "a society person," usually referring to those who start working),<sup>7</sup> but he states:

I think a lot of foreigners in Japan don't make an effort to learn *keigo* because they are not expected to, so, again, like I said, most Japanese people picture an American and they think [we are] very friendly and



smiling all the time and things like that, and talking very casually and very laid back, that sort of thing. In contrast to a Japanese working man who's much more *katai*, just serious, will use *keigo* and make an effort to really appear humble, respectful to whoever they're talking to. I think it's kind of, like it's the fault of both the image, but also because of many Americans in Japan [who] don't try to change that image either. And it's also easier to speak casually, so why should they bother doing something harder when they can get by just fine—although I really think it's leading to kind of a little bit of *sabetsu*.

In Peter's observations there is an expectation associated with Americans—Americans are informal and friendly. His choice of the term *sabetsu* (discrimination) indicates his resistance to such an essentialized view of Americans. Not only did L1 Japanese speakers such as his *kōhai* (junior member) expect him as an American to be informal, but they also did not take him seriously in kendo practice and spoke informally to him. Talking about his *kōhai*, he said:

Like they wouldn't approach seriously in practice or, things like that. (...) I also, part of it, might have been because when most Japanese people see Americans in Japan or something like that, they think "oh gee, I should be friendly" and not use polite talk because for some reason Americans are depicted as being overly friendly in Japan. So they'd introduce themselves and everything will be (...) um, right from the start, casual. But I think it's kinda strange since you don't do it within Japanese culture. Usually you meet somebody from the first time regardless of who they are, you'll be polite.

Peter's accounts support Siegal's (1994) observation that foreigners in Japan experience interactions that diverge from L1 norms.

For Alan, the reason he does not worry too much about using the plain form when talking to someone around his age was due to the lowered expectations for male foreigners. When asked who he spoke to informally using the plain form, he responded:

Um, anyone like around my age or younger that I know. Like I, I don't even know if this is correct. So, part of this I've taken is that because I'm a white guy the bar for me is lower, how accurately I need to use this, and I'm much more comfortable, really, with just um, with less formal talk. So I use that really, in any situation where it doesn't seem apparent that I should use something more formal.

Greg expressed his surprise about how easy it was to get by with just plain speech (by which he appeared to mean speech using the plain form) as a foreigner.

I was also surprised how easy it is to just sort of get by with just plain speech (...) There is not a lot of situations where, as a foreigner, I felt compelled to use polite speech even though I know there were situations where it would have been more polite.

Both Alan's and Greg's responses reveal that their target language is not the language that conforms to the native speaker norm. Their choice of speech styles was both affected by their personal preference (i.e., the language they feel comfortable with) and their perception of the language they feel they were expected to use *as a foreigner*, or *a white guy*.

It also became apparent that the learners had been exposed to another type of expectation both prior to study abroad and during study abroad. In both Sam's observations and experiences related to language associated with men, language that he was taught as being too vulgar to use (*kū* "eat," *meshi* "meal," *omae* "you"), L1 Japanese speakers' and teachers' beliefs about how foreigners should talk became evident. First, he was very surprised to find that the "rude" language was commonly used among L1 male speakers on daily basis when trying to be friendly:

Maybe I was surprised at, at casual, like, um, like, ok, for instance, I learned some things were rude, that's the way they taught it to us (...) And then I learned that... a lot of stuff like that, is not, is very context-dependent. Like it really depends whether something is rude or offensive or, or not. It depends on the context. Like, a lot of times, people would use the, they kind of said the word *ku-u*. It's kind of vulgar or rude. But, it seems like uh, people [of] my age, will, you know, use more of those kinds of words when they are trying to be friendly. (...) I was kind of surprised because all of a sudden [men were] using very, very what we were taught to be vulgar language. You know, um, so maybe that was one of the big surprises... the men would all call each other *omae* not all, but, you know, often, very often, they would refer to each other as *omae* and, um, it was interesting.

He discovered that the "vulgar" language was not always rude and that it was often used to express friendliness. It was context-dependent. Further, he also observed that male speakers also use such language to be playful (and affectionate) despite the fact he had always been told not to use it:

Especially maybe more when they are playing around, or joking with each other, you know, they would use that word, and I would, I was always told “oh that’s rude.” But it’s like, oh if it’s so rude, why are they calling each other that, you know, I mean they’re calling their friends *omae* and um, I also, I was also told like, like um, ok, people would say, ‘oh, don’t say that to someone especially, don’t call a woman *omae*’ or whatever, but I noticed, that it seemed that a lot of Japanese men would call their wives or girlfriends that.

His observation is perfectly in accord with the current author’s observations and understandings of the social meanings of male language. Even in the normative male’s speech, *omae* (as well as *kimi*) are among the conventional informal and intimate ways for husbands to address their wives (Shibamoto Smith 2004).

On the one hand, Sam discovered that Japanese men around him used language that he had been taught as “vulgar” to be friendly or playful. On the other hand, he found that he was not necessarily “allowed” to use men’s language. When Sam tried to use the expression *gomen na* “sorry,” which he had often observed male speakers using, he was “yelled at”:

They use, uh, probably, *na* instead of *ne* more often. Like, say my, uh, you know my host brother often said *gomen na* you know, uhm. And I got yelled at by my host brother for saying that word. (laugh) Not really yelled at but, you know, excuse me? *Gomen na?* (laugh) I mean *gomennasai*. (laugh).

The expression *gomen na* contains the sentence-final particle *na*, a strongly masculine sentence final particle that Sturtz Sreetharan (2004) observed men in Kanto occasionally use. Sam apparently corrected himself to use the more polite *gomen nasai* “sorry” on this occasion. Perhaps due to these kinds of encounters, he considered attempts to use male language as being very risky and tried to remain neutral while trying not to pick up “female language.”

Alan believes that the gender-neutral language he had been taught led his interactants to use similar neutral language:

I think my words stayed pretty gender neutral (...) I think it was just more the kind of a way I was taught. It was very neutral language (...) I was taught the neutral language and then I would speak that with people and they would start speaking that back with me.

Even if L2 learners learn that the social meaning of what they are taught as impolite language is context-dependent, it did not seem easy for them to use it because of L1 speakers' attitudes toward their language and the instruction they received.

These participants' experiences illustrated complicated situations that the non-Asian American L2 Japanese learners had. They were given a break as foreigners and were not expected to conform to L1 norms by using *desu/masu* or honorifics, but they were expected to use a foreigner variety of Japanese. Their use of the plain style and casual demeanor were sometimes expected because they were Americans, but at the same time they were restricted to only use gender neutral language, staying away from the use of 'male language' to be playful or to express friendliness or affection.

### 4.3. Making friends

L2 learners' frequent encounters with informal interactions with peers are often given as one reason why L2 learners may learn more informal language during study abroad. However, being different from everybody else made it difficult for Sam to make friends:

And you know, I had to do my best to fit in, but still kind of running up against, uh, barriers. It was kind of tough for me, very tough. It wasn't easy, like people, at first people were always, you know they were impressed with my language ability and with my knowledge of Japanese culture, they were very, they were flattered. But after a while, it seemed like, people kind of stayed at a distance, they didn't want to get closer. (...) they seemed like they were too afraid to really, you know, get close, get to know me. Or at least, afraid, that that's what I've been told. Because they are kind of shy and they are afraid. They are not really used to foreigners.

It was not easy for Peter to make close friends with his fellow kendo club members, either. When asked whether he made many friends in Japan, he responded:

It takes a long time to get accepted—the type of group that I involved myself in. (...) Also, because the kendo club was so strict that I think that I was a lot more nervous about interacting just casually, that I didn't wanna screw up or insult somebody unintentionally by making a joke or something like that. So, I think I was maybe a little bit too uptight.

Both Sam's and Peter's accounts revealed that they made an effort to

fit in in order to be accepted; in other words, they were not necessarily their own selves. Moreover, Greg responded in the post-study questionnaire (Iwasaki 2007) that he regretted not having made friends in Japan. It appears, for at least three of them, it was not necessarily interaction with close friends or peers that affected their learning/choice of the speech style; rather it may have been their desire to fit in and make friends that contributed to their learning and choice of language, leading to the choice that they perceived their peers favored while avoiding the “risky” choices (i.e., joking and playing around).

#### 4.4. Accounts of explicit socialization

The participants’ host families and peers socialized the learners to use certain types of language, sometimes to use the plain style, other times to use what they perceived as more polite language.

Greg mentioned earlier in the interview that he had defaulted to the plain style. He was then asked if his speech style preference changed over time. His response below suggests that he changed his speech style soon after arriving in Japan because both his host mother and peers explicitly told him to use the plain style:

Um, yeah, it was pretty much my default for the whole way through. When I first, when I first arrived, I tried using the *desu/masu* form and then, people were just like, “Oh, just use the plain form” so I, you know, talking to my host-family, they’re like ‘No no, use the plain form’ or when I met someone, that was around my own age, it’s um, you know, “Use plain form.”

Likewise, Sam’s host family advised him to use the plain style at home because he was *kazoku to issho* “the same as a family member.” When asked where he used informal language in Japan, he said:

Well, with my host family. (I see.) Because they treated me like I was a member of the family. They told me, you know, *kazoku to issho*. That was what she said to me. And, um, I started off, using all polite form because I didn’t really know her well and I was kind of, afraid of offending her. But you know, we kind of eased into, you know, we got to know each other better, and kind of eased into a situation where it was more like talking to a member of your family. Um, so I used informal speech with her, you know, with my host brother, with my host father, and the members of the club, the glee club.

For Alan, whose preference was to speak less formally, it was a friend who provided explicit guidance about being polite. His friend made him realize that he should add the polite expression *gozaimasu* when talking to *toshiue no hito* “older people.” He recalls in the exchanges with the Interviewer (abbreviated as “I”):

A: There was probably this one time when I got reprimanded by a friend, like um, “*toshiue no hito ni gozaimasu tsukenasai.*”

I: Who said that?

A: A friend of mine.

I: *Gozaimasu*, wow. That’s awfully polite.

A: Oh, because, I was, I was talking, we’d asked some like old guy for directions.

I: I see.

A: So, I said “*arigatō*”

I: Ah, *arigatō gozaimasu.*

A: Yeah.

I: Oh, I see, I see.

A: Not like, you know, um, *de gozaimasu ka.*<sup>8</sup> You can say that was, uh, kind of a shock. So I remember that moment.

Undoubtedly, Alan had been introduced to the informal “thank you” *arigatō* and formal/polite *arigatō gozaimasu* during his elementary language instruction, but apparently he was unsure of when to use them. His friend told him to add it with older people, using the authoritative, polite imperative *nasai* at the end of the verb *tsukeru* “add,” which is a common form that mothers would use to a child. In this incident, Alan was positioned as a student or child (the type of identity L2 learners sometimes obtain via classroom instruction, see Block 2009). This positioning, that Alan is not used to outside the classroom, must have been a reason that this “reprimand” was an unforgettable shock to him.

The above incident illustrates the explicit verbal socialization, but Alan also recalls non-verbal signals to his language. He clearly recalls his professor’s reaction to his informal language:

A: You can pick up, yeah, like if somebody they get a bit quiet or something, maybe it’s like, “whoa, maybe I should have been more polite.”

I: Were there any situations like that?

A: Yeah. Um, I had been hanging out with my friends a lot. And there was, um, when I come back when I was still at [the university] and I was talking to one of my professors, and trying to explain to him why, like, I should be in the next class because I wanted things more, harder and challenging and more *taihen*. Um, and I just, I hadn't realized it, but in classes, everyone, all the students speak very informally. So I just without even thinking, I went to him and didn't really use any kind of polite forms at all. He, uh, he looked kind of shocked.

I: Really?

A: Shocked. Yeah, like, he wasn't happy when I stopped, when [I] finished speaking.

Alan realized that talking to an older, socially higher status person in informal language (not using the *desu/masu* form or honorifics) about his class being too easy must have offended the professor. After this incident, Alan became much more careful about his language.

Peter did not have problems like the one Alan had, but when asked what the best way to learn honorific language was, Peter responded that it was 'trying to use it in formal situations and screwing up. When you make a mistake in *keigo* and you get funny looks.'

The explicit language socialization they experienced may reflect the L1 speakers' attempts to socialize the learners to the L1 norm or to a particular foreigner variety of Japanese that the L1 speakers felt was legitimate (as seen in Sam's episode of using *gomen na*).

Although no established norms for host family language can be assumed (given the fact that Japanese families rarely host L1 Japanese speaking students), both the current study and H. M. Cook's (2008) study suggest that Japanese host families socialize their foreigner students into the plain style family variety.

#### 4.5. The *desu/masu* style and politeness

It was revealed that even those who used the *desu/masu* form both in pre- and post-OPIs, Alan, Sam, Peter (see Table 2), experienced a great deal of confusion once they arrived in Japan. They all primarily used the *desu/masu* style upon arrival, but they were unsure of which style to use to those who were not teachers or peer students. Alan said:

Before I went, it was, it seemed like, I should use *desu/masu* basically anywhere [except] where like very casual, like someone, like a close friend of mine, um, otherwise just use *desu/masu*, use always *desu/masu*, which, my understanding has always been like, either it's very true, or

this is how it is. Or this is the rule I should use, so I don't get myself into trouble. Um, there were a lot of kinds of confusions for me.

Sam's understanding of the use of *desu/masu* that he learned in the United States was related to only two types of interactants: his teachers and L1 Japanese students assisting class activities called "practicum," but interactants varied completely in Japan:

I was sort of like, "ok, I use *desu/masu* to talk to the teacher, and I use the plain form to talk to the practicum students." But besides that, I don't think that I had a real good understanding of when to use it and when not. Because, I mean, first of all, teachers and practicum, but when I go to Japan, I'm thinking, you know, I have to extend it. How do I talk when I'm speaking to someone at the door; how do I talk when I am, you know, in a meeting with a club member; how do I speak to, the, the head of the Physics Department who's in a church choir, singing tenor with me. You know what I mean? It's very complicated...especially when I know the people who are, you know, I mean, are in a high position, but getting to know you well, and start speaking to you in plain form, and start speaking casually. Then you kind of wonder, then, it may confuse you...because you know you should be using *keigo* when you talk to them. But, but kind of informal *keigo*. You know what I mean. It's weird. Because you have to...try to be friendly, but, at the same time, still use *desu/masu*.

The statement that he tried to be friendly while using *desu/masu* prompted an extensive sequence of exchanges in the interview, which revealed his dilemma of acting friendly and respectful at the same time. He talked about difficulty to express informality/friendliness vs. politeness in Japanese.

(...) you want to look like a respectable, you know, young person. (...) Um, but I don't know. Um, being friendly. Um. I don't know. Maybe so, and um... (...) I'm trying to think, like, but it's hard to be friendly when using *desu/masu*. It's kind of, you know, when [I'm] trying to be polite, but I kind of get a little nervous and get kind of tense, it's a little harder to be natural. I think it's much easier to speak naturally when you are using the plain form. Like casual. Like I said, it gets, it gets complicating. (...) When I'm using, um, *desu/masu* with somebody, who is, um, you know, a higher status and older. But, I know the person well. I try to be, you know, I'm trying to be friendly, but at the same time also polite, and that's difficult.



For Sam, it was important to express friendliness to those he felt he knew well, but he found it difficult to be respectful and friendly at the same time when using Japanese.

While acknowledging the importance of *desu/masu*, Alan realized that the form is not inherently polite. When asked what it means to be polite, he said:

To be polite is, how about, to pay attention and share respect. Umm, I have been polite to someone, you know, always let them speak, um, use polite words, um, don't...you should never feel like you're jabbing at them. It's kind of hard to explain. You know you're not trying to put them in a hard position, for example, um, I dunno, wear a smile and use polite words. I think it's important to be able to not offend people. And I think using *desu/masu* is part of that. I think you can use *desu/masu* perfectly and still offend people really well.

He also tried to clarify his understanding of politeness by saying:

Maybe, um, maybe the way to explain my understanding now, is that you can be very polite, and kind, and, you know, respectful without putting in *desu/masu* at the end of every single word.

Though Alan relates *desu/masu* to politeness due undoubtedly to the instruction he received and the way the interviewer asked him the question, he is also aware that the use of *desu/masu* does not always result in politeness. He is cognizant that politeness depends on how the hearer feels.

Peter noticed and was surprised that L1 Japanese speakers mix the plain and *desu/masu* forms. When asked whether he observed the use of honorifics in Japan he said:

I was also surprised because, listening to a *kōhai* talk to a *senpai*, the *kōhai*, depending on the relationship how polite they were, would kind of vary, too. And also I thought everything had to have like *desu/masu* at the end. Otherwise you were being rude. But they just throw it in once in a while in to a, in a sentence. But most of the time they just speak completely casually. So, I don't know if it's just because the *senpai* and *kōhai* were close, or, if it's just a natural thing.

Peter clearly became aware that the *desu/masu* form was not bound to a fixed contextual factor such as informal setting or specific *senpai-kōhai* relationship though Peter was not aware how these Japanese speakers shifted their speech styles or at least was not able to express it.

Furthermore, his style shift after study abroad showed that he had tacit knowledge of style shift (Iwasaki 2010). In his post-study-abroad OPI, he used *desu/masu* in only about 70% of the predicates (as compared to 80% before studying abroad), shifting from the dominant *desu/masu* style to the plain style in the ways reflecting the social meanings of the plain form.

#### 4.6. How they chose their speech styles

Though there was some confusion over when and how to use the *desu/masu* form, the learners developed their own understandings of the social meanings of the plain and *desu/masu* forms and preferences over time. When in doubt, Peter preferred to err on the polite side with his club mates, albeit mindful of its potential adversative consequence:

I'd rather offend somebody by being polite than not. But, it's uh, it can work against you too, obviously, because it kind of shows distance, I think, too. So you are not as close to the person by speaking politely. So they think that's also one of the reasons that comes from just simply being nervous, not understanding how things work within the club.

He was aware that his use of *desu/masu* would distance him; yet, he chose the *desu/masu* style when in doubt. At the same time, he understood very well that it was important to use the plain style with his *dōkyūsei* “peer students.”

I mean, when I was speaking with *dōkyūsei* then I don't want to use just constant *keigo* because it distances from them, right? So, I tried to interact as casually as possible there. How a peer would address me I'd address a peer in a similar way.

When getting to know people, his decision to switch from the *desu/masu* form to the plain was often prompted by his peer interactants' switch, but he was afraid that he sometimes switched too late:

Like I noticed, um, girls tend to stay in *desu/masu* longer when speaking to me. But if somebody speaks to me politely I feel I should respond politely most of the time, even if they are younger, or, a girl, or, whatever the case maybe. But I'm not sure maybe it's also keeping a little bit of a gap there. Something that I'm not still 100 percent sure of. It's just kind of, I guess um, a guess or a hunch when to change.

Although Alan mostly used *desu/masu* with older people, he felt more comfortable when using the plain style because of the sense of distance that *desu/masu* carries:

I guess one thing you could feel, I could say, is that, when I use *desu/masu* it's more like, uh, I feel like I'm kind of using the Japanese politeness and the Japanese smile. (...) Kind of the smile and being kind and maybe a little bit kind of formal distance.

Another reason Alan preferred the plain style seemed to be his perception of how L1 Japanese speakers of his age evaluated his Japanese proficiency:

Yeah. I don't know, like um, it's actually funny. When I talk to people, like people my age using *desu/masu*, I found that somehow their expectations of how much Japanese I could speak went way down. It was kind of interesting. And that could just be because my *desu/masu* forms aren't so good. But it seems...I don't know it seems too formal. That's just my feeling.

Greg, who was predominantly using the plain form in the post-study abroad OPI (Iwasaki 2010), as summarized in Table 2, did not use the *desu/masu* form even in the situations where he felt it would be better to use it:

There are situations that I felt that it was really bad that I had not used it. Or, there is, uh, generally people didn't seem, like I've already expressed to you, I would have expected, when meeting someone new, probably *desu/masu* would be the way to go. But when meeting someone around my own age, then, plain form is still, still seems all right. No one was expecting *desu/masu* in that situation.

For this reason, Greg maintains that he defaulted to the use of the plain style when speaking to people around his age. He elaborated the reason why:

I think it's mostly because it's easier, and partially because I want to stay consistent. Like I said um, typically, if I, if it's someone about my own age and if I am actually talking to them, in a conversation, [with] someone new, like I would start out *desu/masu* and then fall into the plain style.

However, Greg made an effort to use *desu/masu* with someone older than he was and when making requests.

If I was going to use *desu/masu*, [it was] typically with somebody older than me. Um, they're like, typically like, 30 years old or older, um, I try to make an effort to use *desu/masu*. (...) If I'm, say, making a request, I'll typically make it in plain form. I generally won't go so far as to, you know, go "I need help with something." (So, you make requests using the plain forms?) No, no, I mean I make requests in polite form. Because I need something um, I try to be a little bit more polite.

With his Japanese teachers, despite the fact that they were older than he, he did not feel the need to use the *desu/masu* style even though he knew that the polite style was the language to use:

Typically, with my teachers I ended up using plain forms just because it was your...okay, I had to do it everyday. I know, I know that they did, traditionally it should be um *desu/masu*, or even occasionally *keigo* depending on the situation. It just ended up being plain forms, that's [because] I talked to them all the time and none of the teachers complained to me in the past, so I guess it really didn't bother them, I don't think.

Sam, who earlier shared the confusion he experienced about speech styles upon arrival in Japan, felt that he had gained a much better understanding of when to use each style. He became aware that one needs to change style depending on the context and even within the context. In his observation, even *gakusei* "students" would change their styles in some contexts such as at meetings or when talking to a higher status person such as *buchō* "the head of a club."

I think that, that got better, for me, definitely. Because, you see how when they spend a lot of time with one or two people, then you see, how their language changes depending on who they are talking to. (...) Um, just like I said, um, say you are in the glee club, if you have some kind of a camp or something with them, go some place, then you'll be spending a lot of time with the same people, and see how their language varies, you know, within the context, like when we're in a meeting, you know *gakusei* talk differently than, when you, um, you know, in rehearsal talking to us, [inaudible] toward the *buchō*.

An observation that contexts are essential was also shared by Peter, who highlighted the importance of learning both the plain and *desu/masu* styles by saying:

You can't just focus on one because every situation is different. Understanding the context is one of the biggest points in learning the language. So, it's communication and that's a big part of it. Not just knowing vocabulary or how to put sentences together but also in what manner to address people, and how they receive you and how, they see you as addressing them. It's the perspective of the person that you are talking to that's important, rather than your own.

Peter's statement, somewhat similarly to Greg's earlier statement on mood and emotion, relates to constructing interpersonal relationships in each given context, wherein the appropriate "manner to address people" matters rather than vocabulary or grammar.

The participants' responses reveal their active agency and reveal that they do not necessarily choose the language that conforms to the L1 norm. Their choice is often related to their discomfort with the *desu/masu* form, finding it more comfortable to use the plain form. Yet, while Alan and Greg more proactively use the plain style, Peter may opt to use the *desu/masu* form when in doubt. Moreover, Sam and Peter (and Alan), who have had more diverse opportunities of socialization than Greg, are mindful of the importance of contexts for their language choice and the consideration of the hearers' perspectives.

## 5. Discussion

The four participants' responses revealed a number of important social factors that undoubtedly affected their language socialization. As male American L2 Japanese learners, they faced a certain type of expectation about the language they should be using (less formal, but not very colloquial or manly) and the essentialized American identity (informal and friendly stereotypical Americans). In fact, Iino (2006) revealed that some L2 Japanese learners felt that they were expected to play a foreigner role, and that acting like a foreigner and even pretending not to know much about Japan or the Japanese language made their lives easier since Japanese people became more tolerant of their behaviors. Although none of the four participants in this study intentionally played a foreigner role, it is plausible that Greg's teachers (and possibly other Japanese speakers with whom he interacted) were tolerant of his behavior diverging from the norm (i.e., his overuse of the plain form) because of his Intermediate-Low/Mid level proficiency. In contrast, the professor reported above and some of the friends that Alan interacted with might have been less tolerant due partially to his higher proficiency of

Intermediate-High/Advanced-Low (and thus clearly not acting in the role of a foreigner).

While L2 learners were “allowed” to diverge from the norm, they were restricted to the gender-neutral language (without using often perceived “impolite” language that is associated with male speakers). This constraint was also reported by a male L2 Japanese speaker whom Ohta (1993) interviewed. Rick, a proficient Japanese speaker from the United States who lived in Japan for six years, felt that he was accepted almost as Japanese. Yet he stated that when he used very colloquial language that men would use, Japanese men around him ‘just did not like it’ (Ohta 1993: 219). There is a particular kind of Japanese that is believed to suit these foreign learners, believed by teachers, textbook authors, and some of those whom these L2 learners interacted with.

On the one hand, L2 learners could get by without learning honorifics or the subtleties of male language and they were ‘allowed’ to be informal by speaking predominantly in the plain style. L2 learners like Greg who opt for the default use of the plain style can readily be accepted—as a foreigner. On the other hand, L2 male American learners have more hurdles to overcome if they would like to fully make use of a repertoire of language choices to be friendly and playful (and to be rude, when they wish to be). L2 learners who study abroad are not prepared to use or interpret the social meanings of male language due to their prior language instruction. L2 Japanese teachers and textbooks rarely mention “impolite” language associated with male speakers, or they tell students not to use it despite the fact that it is very commonly used in informal language by male college students without being rude, to express friendliness or intimacy and to be playful.

Under these circumstances, these learners had internal struggles to cope with in order to construct their social identities. The easiest choice might have been constructing an expected informal male American identity and to choose the plain style (which to many of them felt comfortable and easy to use). But despite their discomfort with the distance that the *desu/masu* form may create and their desire to express friendliness to their interactants, some of the learners such as Sam and Peter were keen to construct such identities as respectful young men. In other words, there are two types of social identities that they are compelled and/or expected to construct: a respectful young man/club member and a “friendly” (American) man. This dilemma is likely to stem from the differential values that friendliness carries in politeness in

Japanese and American English. In fact, in the case of Peter, he may be expressing resistance to such an imagined essentialized national identity by choosing to use the *desu/masu* style when in doubt.

These L2 learners' language choices in each moment and in each interaction are the result of their struggles between these two seemingly conflicting values and identities. Greg, who primarily interacted with his host mother, college teachers, and peers and who might have opted to present himself as a laid-back friendly American, primarily used the plain style unless he was talking to older people he did not know well or unless he was making requests. Likewise, Alan preferred to use the plain style though he made efforts to use the *desu/masu* form with older people. Both Sam and Peter, who socialized in a wider range of contexts than Greg and Alan, valued honorifics as well as the plain style and they both seemed to be trying to learn and use language like L1 speakers in order to index the social role of respectful young men whenever appropriate.

The four learners' heightened awareness about *desu/masu* in this study appears to present a marked contrast with the relative lack of awareness about the *desu/masu* form among the learners that H. M. Cook (2008) studied. H. M. Cook did not find a clear correlation between the host families' use of *desu/masu* and plain styles and the learners' perception of their position in the host family. For example, despite their host families' use of marked *desu/masu*, representing a teacher's voice, two learners reported that they felt they were treated like family members. Perhaps this apparent lack of attention to the *desu/masu* among the learners in H. M. Cook's study is partially due to the timing of the data collection. These learners had already spent 3 to 12 months with their host families prior to the data collection and were still living with them; the learners might have become accustomed to the interactional styles in each family and adjusted to the plain style if they had been the *desu/masu* style speaker when joining the family. The focused semi-structured retrospective interviews in the current study might have triggered memories of their experiences across the entire time they studied abroad (e.g., the confusion they experienced soon after they arrived in Japan). This of course is merely speculation. A longitudinal qualitative study that starts from L2 learners' arrival in Japan is called for to understand the learners' language socialization processes, namely, the learners' own interactional styles as well as their interactants' (host families and others such as club members) interactional styles and how they change over time.

## 6. Pedagogical Implications

The learners' accounts of their experiences in Japan uncovered a major disconnect between what they had been taught in the classroom and the social encounters they experienced. While textbooks emphasize the formal register utilizing the *desu/masu* style (H. M. Cook 2008; Matsumoto and Okamoto 2003), university students who study abroad encounter more social situations where the plain style is favored unless they venture into social settings where the formal register is the norm, as Sam and Peter did. The learners were not sure whom to use the *desu/masu* form with beyond their teachers as addressees upon arrival in Japan. They had learned the form as a "polite" form to use with the teachers, and were bewildered when observing the mixing of styles.

There are at least two linguistic ideologies that lead to L2 learners' difficulties. First, *desu/masu* is believed to (exclusively) mark politeness and is often taught as if there was a one-to-one mapping between the form and social meaning. It is no surprise that such over-simplification of the phenomena leads to confusion among L2 learners once they encounter real language use. In order to remedy this problem, H. M. Cook (2008) proposed an 'indexical approach' to teaching Japanese as L2, presenting the *desu/masu* form as a tool to index social identities to accomplish interactional goals with its core meaning as the self-presentational stance. By not assuming a one-to-one mapping between the form and social meaning, L2 learners are more likely to be better prepared to observe and understand the dynamics of the style shifts within an interaction.

Second, there are hidden assumptions with regard to the types of language L2 learners should use. There is an assumption held by teachers and textbook authors that L2 learners should speak politely and that *desu/masu* is the safest style for them to use (H. M. Cook 2008); it is also assumed that it is safe for them to speak in a gender-neutral way. Recently, stereotyped gender language in Japanese textbooks has been discussed (Siegal and Okamoto 2003, Nagata and Sullivan 2005), but the focus of these studies seems to be on the over-emphasis of idealized "proper" women's language, while in reality women use language with a "masculine touch," which can be considered neutral to today's youth. Curiously, strong masculine language, which is commonly used among young L1 Japanese men, is nearly absent in the textbooks and is often dismissed as "impolite" language in the classroom. When Itakura (2008) interviewed male Hong Kong professionals who were proficient in



Japanese and often interacted with Japanese clients and/or colleagues, it was found that some of them valued the Japanese masculine language as a resource for creating solidarity in their workplace, which gives them access to in-group membership. Building such a relationship in the workplace is obviously very desirable. A question remains whether such solidarity and membership is available only to East Asian learners of Japanese or is also accessible to white Westerners, but depriving L2 learners of the resource a priori seems problematic.

It is reasonable that language instruction and textbooks would reflect the dominant linguistic ideologies to a certain extent since students are likely to interact with Japanese speakers who hold these beliefs. But at the same time, descriptions and guidance with regard to real language use beyond the dominant linguistic ideologies need to be provided to help students understand both common beliefs and real language practices. Ishida's (2009) recent report on awareness-raising instruction on style shifting in the beginning level courses and the outcome in the students learning is encouraging. It is imperative to further advance our language education to equip L2 learners with richer linguistic resources so that they make informed language choices to construct their social identities. The key here is to help them make *informed* choices, rather than imposing a native speaker model as their assumed target.

## 7. Conclusion

Despite the limitation of data (i.e., the small number of participants, the 1.5 year interval after their return, the presumption of the L1 norm as the target at the time of data collection), the L2 Japanese participants' responses illuminate the complexity of the use of language, especially of speech styles, and the expectations of people with whom they interacted. The participants had diverse experiences despite the differences of their ranges of activities and interactants, and commonly-shared dilemmas related to being an American male L2 Japanese learner emerged. Their use of the *desu/masu* form or lack thereof reflects their response to the dilemmas. Future research that examines a larger number of L2 learners' social interactions during the entirety of their study abroad and is immediately followed by retrospective interviews is desired to shed more light on learners' dilemmas and struggles in language socialization processes and their changes in interactional styles.

Yet, the four learners' observations have significant implications for language teaching. Greg's observation with regard to the language

classroom only ‘conveying facts’ is analogous to Siegal’s (1994) observation that the classroom is designed to teach how to carry out transactional tasks. More emphasis needs to be placed on constructing social identities and interpersonal relationships in the language classroom. The learners’ observations are also suggestive of how language educators’ imagined interactions that their students are likely to encounter may greatly diverge from the students’ actual (possibly preferred) interactions, and of how social identities that language educators assume L2 learners should project may differ from the social identities they wish to present.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The following notations are used for glosses: NOM nominative, TOP topic marker, AH addressee honorific, COMP complementizer *that*.
- <sup>2</sup> Three of them had also participated in the post-study abroad assessments reported by Iwasaki (2007).
- <sup>3</sup> Alan’s stay in Japan was a couple of months shorter than the other three participants’ stays. After a couple of weeks in the second semester, he decided not to continue to attend classes and travelled within and outside of Japan. When he travelled outside of Japan, he mostly visited his Japanese friend who was studying abroad or spent time with other Japanese travelers.
- <sup>4</sup> Because the four participants studied in different programs, it was difficult to review the teaching materials used at the host institutions.
- <sup>5</sup> Of the five participants in the original study (Iwasaki 2010), two changed their primary speech style from the *desu/masu* to plain. The other student, Henry, had studied Japanese for two years prior to studying abroad. Thus, the choice of speech style by Greg cannot be (solely) attributed to the fact that he had studied Japanese for a shorter period before studying abroad. Unfortunately,

Henry did not respond to an email message inquiring about his willingness to participate in the interview.

- <sup>6</sup> In the transcripts of the participants' responses, (...) indicates that some parts are omitted and segments within [ ] were the best guess by the author when the segment was not clearly heard. Some very short back-channelings by the interviewer (e.g., "uh-huh") were deleted. Other back-channeling and clarification questions were indicated in ( ) if there were only a few of them; otherwise, entire exchanges are reported.
- <sup>7</sup> Peter may have realized the importance of *keigo* for *shakaizin* through his work experience rather than study abroad, as pointed out by one of the reviewers.
- <sup>8</sup> The expression *de gozaimasu* is a polite form of copula.

#### APPENDIX INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did your study abroad experience help your overall learning of Japanese?
2. In what areas do you think you particularly improved? What helped you the most?
3. What kinds of observations did you make in terms of language variations (e.g., casual/polite speech, age-related variations, gender-related variations, and dialects)? In what contexts did you have the most exposures to such varieties? What were your notable discoveries?
4. Did you actively try to learn any of the variations? What made you decide to learn those varieties? What helped you to learn?
5. What was your understanding of when to use the *desu/masu* style rather than the more informal plain style before studying abroad? What is your understanding now? (How do you decide which speech style to use?)
6. What does it mean to be 'polite' to you?
7. To whom do you usually use the more informal plain style after study abroad?
8. How important do you consider it is to learn to use the *desu/masu* style appropriately? Why do you think so?
9. How important do you consider it is to learn to use the plain style? Why do you think so?
10. How important do you consider it is to learn to use *keigo*? Why?

11. Are there any strategies that you adopted in order to learn how to speak appropriately or politely? How did observing Japanese people speak help?

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