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The development of interactional positioning in L2 Japanese

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Abstract

The use of the sentence-final particle *ne* by a group of ten learners of Japanese is investigated longitudinally over a period spanning two years: before, during, immediately after and six-months after return from a year of study in Japan (SA). Quantitative observation reveals two patterns of use; that is, ‘prolific’ and ‘exiguous’ styles. Learners in the prolific group display frequent use from before the start of SA, and a subsequent plateau; the others use *ne* more rarely until after the SA, when the two groups’ patterns start converging. In line with previous research, we argue that a certain level of lexical and grammatical competence (which we posit to be at least higher intermediate level) is a precondition for the use of *ne*, but against previous research, we suggest that the amount of naturalistic exposure in an immersion context is not necessarily a decisive factor in its development. Qualitative analysis of the conversational-analytical structuring of interactional meanings (e.g., Ishida, 2009) shows that regardless of the amount of particle use, both groups are able to deploy *ne* as a marker of interactional alignment in formulaic and non-formulaic tokens. Interestingly, developments can be observed also in the six months after SA, in which all learners increase proportion and/or range of uses of *ne*.

1. Introduction

Participating in spoken interaction requires the deployment of interactional competence, that is, an ability to develop and manage social interactions in discursively appropriate ways (Hall, 1995). While the term ‘communicative competence’ conceptualizes a single individual’s ability, ‘interactional competence’ presupposes a sphere of inter-subjectivity: the individual’s ability to employ linguistic and interactional resources contingent upon what other participants do and what interactional practices they engage in – including

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rhetorical scripts, vocabulary and syntactic structure, turn management, topic organization, and the opening and closing of boundaries between practices and participation frameworks (He & Young, 1998; Young, 2011). Compliance with the norms regulating the ‘interaction order’, including principles of sequence organization, represents a mechanism for managing mutual understanding (Heritage, 2009, p. 306) but also epistemic positioning, which ultimately enables the projection of personal identity (Heritage, 2009, p. 310).

Research is growing on how such a broad range of resources are deployed in the development of interactional competence by second language (L2) learners (Dings, 2016; Nguyen, 2011; Taguchi, 2014; Young & Miller, 2004).¹ For example, Taguchi’s (2014) study of Japanese L2 learners before and after a period of study abroad (SA) finds that increased use of incomplete sentences contributes to more economical communication (e.g., smoother turn-taking and joint turn construction); increased interactional competence is therefore the result of improved abilities in the co-construction of meanings during talk-in-progress. Similarly, Dings (2016) studies the performance of a Spanish L2 learner during SA and suggests that what enables her to play a more active role in the co-construction of communication is an increased ‘alignment activity’ (i.e. the use of ‘alignment moves’ such as collaborative completions, adopting the other’s point of view, etc.).

This study attempts to investigate the development of interactional competence in L2 Japanese learners by means of an analysis of their mode of participation in conversation; that is, the way in which learners position themselves vis-à-vis their interlocutors as well as (information exchanged in) the conversation itself. We do this by examining the use of a particular interactional resource, the particle *ne* (‘isn’t it?’/‘right?’)², referred to in the literature as the ultimate ‘interactional particle (IP)’ (Masuda, 2011, p. 522), by a group of ten learners of Japanese during a relatively long period spanning two years: before, during, immediately after and six-months after return from a SA in Japan. Although studies on interactional markers in L2 Japanese in previous literature abound (Ishida, 2009; Masuda, 2009, 2011; Ohta, 2001; Sawyer, 1992; Yoshimi, 1999), only a few examined them in a longitudinal perspective (e.g., Ishida, 2009; Ohta, 2001; Sawyer, 1992), and as far as we know, mostly in elementary to intermediate learners (with some exceptions, such as Shibahara (2002) and Kizu, Pizziconi & Iwasaki (2013)). The current study is significant in that (1) it extends the scope of existing investigations (Ishida, 2009; Masuda, 2011; Ohta, 2001; Sawyer, 1992) to a more advanced proficiency group; (2) it explores the possible role of life-style conditions during SA; and (3) it examines the long-term effect of SA, based on the learners’ performance 6 months after

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return from SA, when attrition phenomena are often expected. Analysis of the whole corpus is still in progress, but we report some preliminary findings to the following three research questions:

1. Are usage patterns observed in beginner to early intermediate learner populations also observed in our intermediate to advanced learner group?
2. Does the SA context contribute to development in this group, and if so how?
3. Do learners keep developing after return from SA?

Section 2 and 3 respectively review previous studies on *ne* in native speakers' production and in L2 Japanese. Section 4 outlines our methodology, and results are reported and examined quantitatively and qualitatively in sections 5 and 6. Conclusive observations are sketched out in section 7.

2. *The sentence-final particle 'ne' in native production*

As mentioned in section 1, interactional positioning is discursively achieved by means of strategic usage of a broad range of linguistic resources. Japanese possesses a relatively conspicuous set of linguistic forms indexing discourse participants' stance toward the information and the interlocutor (Ikegami, 1989; Maynard, 1993 among many others), including IPs. Among these, the most frequent is *ne*,³ which we chose for our study of learner behaviour. Studies from diverse disciplinary approaches have highlighted a broad range of meanings and functions of *ne*, as summarized below.

On the more cognitive end, Kamio (1994) discusses *ne* in terms of 'territory of information' and the speaker's epistemic stance, according to which *ne* marks information considered to belong to the addressee's territory (in contrast to *yo*, marking information that belongs to the speaker's own territory), or shared in equal measure by the speaker and his/her interlocutor. In contrast, Takubo & Kinsui (1997) take *ne* to signal that the speaker is carrying out cognitive operations *independently* of their beliefs regarding the hearer's knowledge, and rather in relation to the strength of their own assumptions about the status of the information within a 'mental space' (a 'mental discourse domain', which organizes linguistic expressions and the memory base). *Ne* assists the organization of such domain, and can signal, for example, that some mental computation is required (that is, information is not easily accessible and needs some degree of processing) in order to make certain statements, even when such information allegedly falls within the speaker's own territory (Takubo & Kinsui, 1997, p. 755).

Cook (1990), exploring its functions in full turn, turn-internal and turn-final

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positions, finds that the use *ne* is not limited to “agreement with any particular propositional content” and highlights instead the particle’s role in indexing ‘affective common ground’ (Cook, 1990, p.32) between the speaker and the interlocutor, mitigating face threatening acts and signaling intimacy, or managing discourse structure, such as marking the introduction of a new topic.

Katagiri (2007), noting that sentence-final particles or IPs are typical of spoken and dialogical registers but not written or monological texts, proposes to analyse their functions in terms of what is indeed peculiar to dialogue, that is, the need for ongoing coordination among participants. Dialogue requires the establishment of common ground, and IPs are commonly assumed to consist of acknowledgment responses which facilitate such coordination. In Katagiri’s (2007) dialogue coordination account, *ne* (once again in contrast to *yo*) is said to present “the propositional content as something the speaker has not yet wholeheartedly accepted” (p. 1317).

However, other research focusing on the dynamics of conversation appears to reach quite different conclusions. Hayano (2017) sees *ne* as one of the resources the Japanese language possesses to manage epistemics, and notes that it is “used, often reciprocally, when the interactants share access to the referent” (Hayano, 2017, p. 167). Saigo (2011), also examining talk-in-interaction, attempts to capture the role of *ne* by utilizing the *gestalt* notion of figure/ground. Content which is *accepted* by the participants is considered to be a ‘ground’, upon which new content, yet to be agreed by the participants, is proposed as a ‘figure’. *Ne* is said to occur “when the speaker proposes that the figure emerging in the talk should be treated as a ground for the next proposition without further ado. Thus, it typically occurs when he expects that the figure is either already known to the addressee or readily acceptable” (Saigo, 2011, p. 18).

Signaling turn-completion has been considered as one functional motivation for the very development of IPs in Japanese (Fox, Hayashi, & Jaspersen, 1996) but the importance of signaling sequence organization also extends to the projection of expected relevant stances in subsequent turns (Heritage, 2009). From the viewpoint of interactional order, *ne* could be seen as projecting an alignment (Morita, 2003, quoted in Ishida, 2009) or affiliative action (Tanaka, 2000) in the following turn. These can be seen as the interactional functions of the pragmatic meanings of ‘soliciting confirmation’ and ‘agreement’, conventional tags of the particle *ne* in descriptive analyses and pedagogical definitions. Examining conversation from the viewpoint of speaker ‘involvement’, Lee (2007) characterizes *ne* as a particle inviting the “partner’s involvement in an ‘incorporative’ manner, by which the speaker is committed to align with the partner with respect to the contents and feeling conveyed in the utterance” (Lee, 2007, p. 364).

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Conversation analysis thus appears to be a fruitful perspective for the analysis of the role of *ne* in organizing the contingent and fluid nature of talk-in-interaction (Morita, 2005; Ohta, 2001; Saigo, 2011; Tanaka, 1999, 2000).

In summary, the particle *ne* occurs not only in sentence- or clausal-final positions, but also in turn-initial and turn-internal positions, and even as a turn on its own; in the flow of interaction, *ne* is said to yield different effects depending on the sequential context in which it appears, ranging from turn-taking operations to repair initiation, reconfirming an agreed point, or inviting affiliation (Tanaka, 2000; Lee, 2007). Regardless of its position, however, *ne* utterances are said to signal speakers' alignment to the current activity, or their "mutual orientation for the achievement of situated ongoing conversational intersubjectivity" (a psychological effect of which is the perception of 'common ground' (Morita, 2005, p. 150)). Whichever position it occupies, *ne* "creates a space for negotiation between interlocutors", therefore earning the label of 'interactional particle' (Masuda, 2011, p. 522). The particle *ne* enables participants to actively engage their interlocutors in the conversation, exerting control on its direction, and indexing an active stance in the exchange, thus positioning the speaker on an even ground with other participants.

3. Accounts of 'ne' use in non-native production

While both psychological and conversational interpretations are insightful, controversies over the meanings and functions of *ne* naturally correspond to difficulties in providing clear-cut explanations to learners of Japanese. In Japanese language instruction, the particle *ne* is generally introduced in early chapters of beginner-level textbooks (Banno, Ikeda, Ohno, Shinagawa, & Tokashiki, 2011; Three A Network, 1998). Nevertheless, its acquisition appears to be relatively slow (Ishida, 2009; Masuda, 2009, 2011; Ohta, 2001; Sawyer, 1992; Yoshimi, 1999). Ohta (2001) observed classroom interactions of two beginner-level students over one academic year and found that spontaneous use of *ne* (i.e. use not prompted by the teacher or instructional materials) appeared only twice by the end of the year. Since the particle is introduced and practiced from early on, this suggests a high level of difficulty. Furthermore, Yoshimi's (1999) qualitative discourse study on five L2 learners of Japanese found a high rate of anomalous uses of *ne*, which amounted to more than 30% of their total uses.

A few studies look at the development of *ne* during SA. Sawyer (1992) observes the use of *ne* by 11 beginner-level L2 learners of Japanese through four interviews during SA. Despite individual differences, most learners adopt *ne* rather slowly, some only starting to use it in the third or fourth interview. *Ne* is generally first used in the formulaic

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expression '*soo desu ne* ('Is that so?'/ 'I see'.)' and then deployed in other clauses. Ishida's (2009) conversational analytic study investigates the use of *ne* by an American student through eight conversations during SA. The learner's proficiency level is not indicated, but Ishida notes that before SA he had studied Japanese for two years in high school and two years at a university; even so, not a single instance of *ne* was found in the first two conversations. Ishida's study shows how the student came to use *ne* in a wider range of sequential contexts during SA, and how the expanded use of *ne* enabled him to take more active roles in his conversations.

Masuda's (2011) study of six learners in an intermediate-level, 6-week summer SA program tests findings in Ohta's (2001) classroom setting and Ohta's hypothesis, regarding the movement from less to more active interactional roles through the development of aligning expressions. According to this, learners must first learn to comprehend and acknowledge the interlocutors' contribution, and then arguably learn to exert more control on the interaction with acts of alignment, that is, agreement and assessment. Ohta's developmental stages are confirmed in the SA context, and situational (reliance on English L1) as well as ideological factors (for example, a male learner's belief that the use of *ne* is a feature of feminine language) suggested as possible causes of slow development. Masuda concludes that SA constitutes an important opportunity for the development of interactional competence.

To summarize, previous research finds that, with regards to beginner- and intermediate-level L2 learners: i) *ne* emerges slowly and at the beginning only in formulaic expressions, ii) the range of *ne* uses increases in the SA context (translating in learners' ability to take more active interactional roles in discourse), but iii) a range of social to psychological factors may constrain its acquisition and use.

Although these studies provide interesting insight into the development of *ne* and interactional competence of beginner- or post-beginner level learners, the abilities of intermediate- to advanced-level learners are far less studied, and, to our knowledge, development after periods of SA are yet to be investigated. One exception is Matsumura (2007) which, investigating L2 English learners' performance in advice-giving one, six and twelve months after a period of SA, finds that their understanding of relevant strategies keeps developing over this period. The change in the choice of appropriate strategies (in a multiple-choice task) is attributed to the transformation of the learners' perceptions of self over the same period, from 'college students' to 'members of society'.

Our study contributes to the study of a broad learning trajectory, by examining the development of *ne* in intermediate- to advanced-learners of L2 Japanese over the course of two years, spanning before, during, immediately after, and six months after SA,

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including the learners' use of this resource to manage their interactional positioning.

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4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

The participants were ten intermediate to advanced learners of Japanese (6 males and 4 females), all second-year undergraduates at a university in London, UK at the start of the study. They all majored in Japanese, a four year programme including one year of study at (one of several) Japanese universities. Before going abroad in Year 3, they studied Japanese in an intensive course (eight to ten weekly contact hours) over one or two years⁴. In Year 2, students worked with the textbook *New Approach Japanese Pre-Advanced Course* (Oyanagi, 2002) and other supplemental material. During SA, students studied Japanese and other relevant subjects at different universities in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto but on a variety of materials and contact hours, which this study could not control. Upon return to the UK, all students except one (Carriad) took an advanced-level Japanese language course for three hours per week. In this class, aiming to reach the C1 level of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Language), they engaged in critical reading, discussion and academic writing in Japanese.

Table 1 summarizes their profiles (all names are pseudonyms).

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Table 1 Participants' profile

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nationality	Previous stay in Japan	SA destination	Japanese course after SA
Sakura	20	Female	Irish	N/A	Tokyo	Yes
Lisa	20	Female	British	N/A	Kyoto	Yes
Fubuki	20	Male	British	Once, 1 week	Tokyo	Yes
Rikyuu	20	Male	British	N/A	Kyoto	Yes
Carriad	21	Female	British	4 times, 2 months	Tokyo	No
Solon	21	Male	British/ American	8 times, 1 year	Tokyo	Yes
Bob	21	Male	British	Once, 3 weeks	Kyoto	Yes
Mimi	22	Female	British ⁵	5 times, 5 months	Tokyo	Yes
John	25	Male	British	3 times, 5.5 months	Osaka	Yes
Tani	43	Male	British	10 years	Kyoto	Yes

All participants have English as mother tongue, and all except one (Tani) are in their 20s. Three out of ten students had never been to Japan before SA, while three (Solon, Mimi and Tani) had already stayed in Japan for one year or more.

4.2 Research Methods

The main research instrument are four 15-20 minute interviews conducted over two years. Each interview session was semi-structured, based on three topics (each lasting approximately 5-7 minutes): a) the best place that the interviewee had ever travelled to, b) the most influential person for his/her study, and c) the film, book, or TV program that s/he watched. The interviews took place before, during, immediately after, and 6 months after SA (hereafter referred to as 'PRE', 'DUR', 'POST-1' and 'POST-2', respectively). The interviewees were only told that data would be used to investigate their development of

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Japanese, and the interviewers did not draw participants' attention to the use of *ne*.

The interviews were carried out by four interviewers, all female native speakers of Japanese teaching the language at different universities, but with different degrees of familiarity with the participants, as described below.

Table 2. Profile of interviewers (at the time of study)

Interviewer	Time and place	Affiliation	Relationship with the interviewees
A	PRE and POST-2 (London)	Lecturer at a university in London	All students knew her, but did not necessarily take her course before
B	DUR (Tokyo)	Professor at a university in Tokyo	Students met her for the first time
C	DUR (Osaka and Kyoto)	Professor at a university in Osaka	Students except John met her for the first time.
D	POST-1 (London)	Lector at students' university	Students' former Japanese language teacher

In addition to the interview, a questionnaire including biographical information, the reasons for studying Japanese, learners' expectations regarding SA, and amount of daily use of Japanese outside the classrooms was administered at PRE, DUR, and POST-2. A second questionnaire at DUR further covered their usage of Japanese in and outside the classroom as well as other attitudinal factors, such as their motivation for learning Japanese, integration to Japanese society, and satisfaction with their life. The last questionnaire at POST-2 includes their daily use of Japanese after SA and self-rated achievement of their objectives for SA.

The learner's overall linguistic proficiency was assessed through the Simple Performance-Oriented Test (SPOT) (paper version A) at PRE, POST-1, and POST-2. (cf. Kobayashi, Ford-Niwa, & Yamamoto, 1996 for an account). SPOT Version A is targeted at higher-level learners of Japanese who studied Japanese for 400 to 800 hours, and consists of filling in a cloze-test while listening to a recording.

4.3 Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and coded at a clausal level (all clauses including full

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sentences, subordinate clauses, and intentionally truncated utterances, or fragments). Multi-mora particles including *yone* and *kane*, as well as the filler *ettone*, are not considered in the current study.

All instances of (mono-moraic particle) *ne* were initially counted to understand overall quantitative changes. Then, the ratio of *ne* out of all clauses was calculated. The number of *soo desu ne* ('Is that so?'/ 'I see'.) was separately counted in order to focus on productive or non-formulaic uses, rather than formulaic uses (i.e. *soo desu ne*). The ratio of *ne* usage was then measured against SPOT results to explore correlations with proficiency and with some demographic/life-style questionnaire items, to explore possible affecting factors. It was calculated with the use of statistic software R.

In the second part of the study, we focused on two learners who appeared to follow distinct development trajectories. This analysis highlights how each learner positions himself/herself in the course of interaction, and how *ne* enables such discursive co-construction of their position.

5. *Quantitative Study*

5.1 *Results*

Table 3 below illustrates the frequency of *ne* in each learner's production at PRE, DUR, POST-1 and POST-2 for each participant. SPOT scores out of 65 are also presented.

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Table 3. Ratio of *ne* and SPOT test

	Ratio of total <i>ne</i> out of all clauses (raw number of <i>ne</i> (raw number of <i>soo desu ne</i>))				Japanese proficiency (SPOT score out of 65)		
	PRE	DUR	POST-1	POST-2	PRE	POST-1	POST-2
Solon	44.7% (55 (25))	30.0% (36 (20))	21.9% (21 (16))	22.0% (29 (18))	63	65	65
Fubuki	26.6% (59 (46))	36.6% (60 (31))	25.5% (40 (29))	23.6% (38 (33))	59	64	64
Sakura	16.1% (18 (8))	32.9% (50 (29))	35.3% (49 (36))	31.4% (49 (37))	63	65	65
Carriad	19.9% (28 (23))	10.4% (21 (13))	18.6% (22 (18))	11.9% (15 (11))	47	56	56
Mimi	10.9% (15 (11))	12.1% (27 (6))	33.6% (40 (26))	15.1% (21 (14))	50	62	61
Bob	4.8% (5 (1))	7.7% (13 (10))	8.5% (12 (6))	14.6% (18 (12))	53	61	63
Lisa	4.2% (3 (3))	2.5% (3 (2))	12.5% (14 (4))	13.9% (14 (2))	50	61	61
Rikyuu	3.7% (3 (3))	0% (0 (0))	6.2% (4 (0))	8.2% (5 (0))	50	60	59
John	2.4% (3 (1))	2.9% (2 (2))	6.3% (4 (2))	17.3% (22 (15))	44	60	60
Tani	2.1% (2 (0))	3.1% (3 (2))	4.3% (5 (5))	4.5% (4 (0))	47	37	48

Our results reveal two patterns of the use, which we call ‘prolific’ and ‘exiguous’ styles. Learners in the prolific group (Solon, Fubuki, Sakura, Carriad, Mimi) display frequent use of *ne* from before the start of SA (10% or more), and/or a subsequent plateau at some point. In contrast, learners in the exiguous style group (Bob, Lisa, Rikyuu, John, Tani) rarely used *ne* in both PRE (less than 5%) and DUR (less than 6%). Interestingly, the two groups’ patterns do not start converging until at POST-2, and remain distinct during and until the end of SA.

Figure 1 below visualises the ratio of *ne* in Table 1 above by comparing the prolific and exiguous style groups.

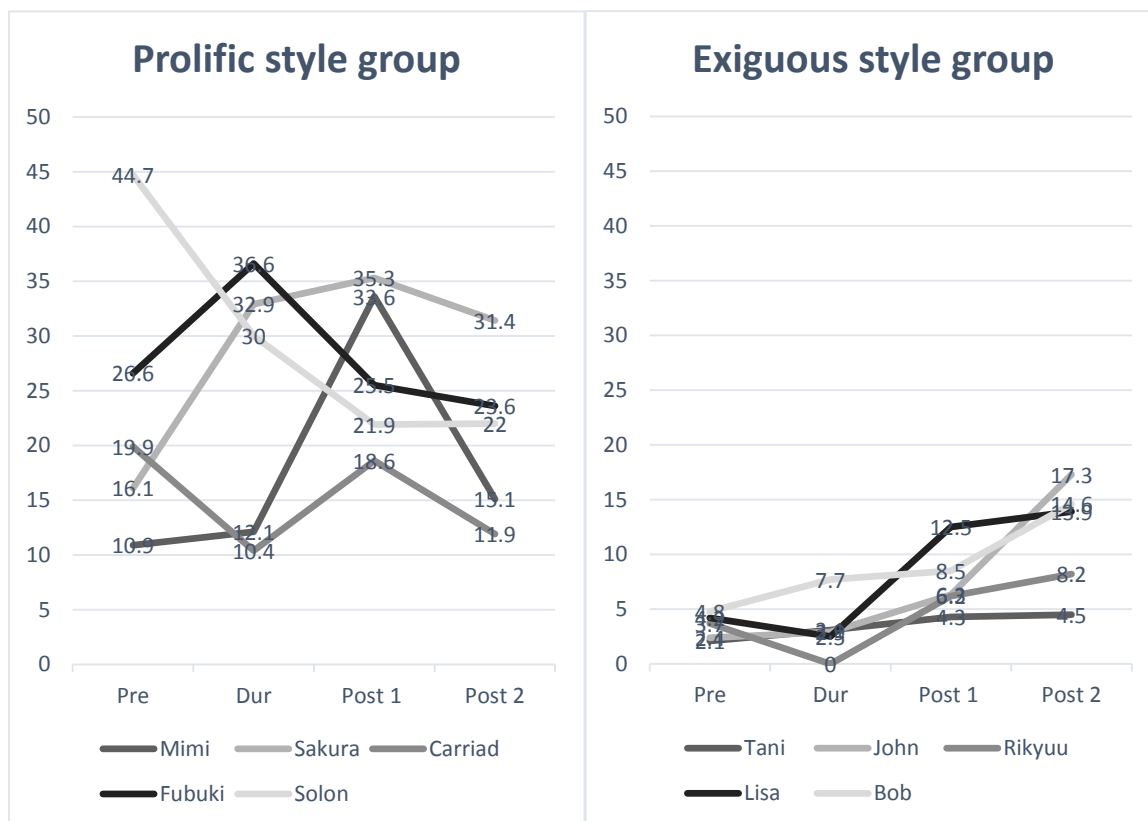


Figure 1. Comparison of the ratio of *ne* between prolific and exiguous style groups

A distinct patterning is apparent in Figure 1, in that for the duration of the first three stages (PRE, DUR and POST-1), no learner in the exiguous style group used *ne* as much as learners in the prolific style group. With the exception of two learners (Rikyuu and Tani) who keep using *ne* very sparingly until the last data point, the others ‘catch up’ with the more prolific users at POST-2.

All learners improved their score from the first SPOT test at PRE (68%-97%) to the last at POST-2 (94%-100%, with a possible ceiling effect; See Table 3 above for details). Based on the observations from previous studies, these scores are considered equivalent to Intermediate-High and above, on the ACTFL OPI (Iwasaki, 2002; Masuda, 2009). A strong correlation was observed between the ratio of *ne* and SPOT results at the start- and end-points of testing, PRE and POST-2 (PRE: $r= 0.73$, $p= ***0.002$, POST-1: $r=0.54$, $p=.1$, POST-2: $r=0.81$ $***p=0.005$).⁶

Although the results of the life-style questionnaires did not flag up any notable differences between the two groups regarding self-reported satisfaction with life in Japan or integration to Japanese society, they show a considerable difference in terms of the self-reported amount of exposure to Japanese during SA. Figure 2 illustrates the average

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hours of Japanese language use for various activities in the prolific and exiguous groups, based on their questionnaire results in DUR.

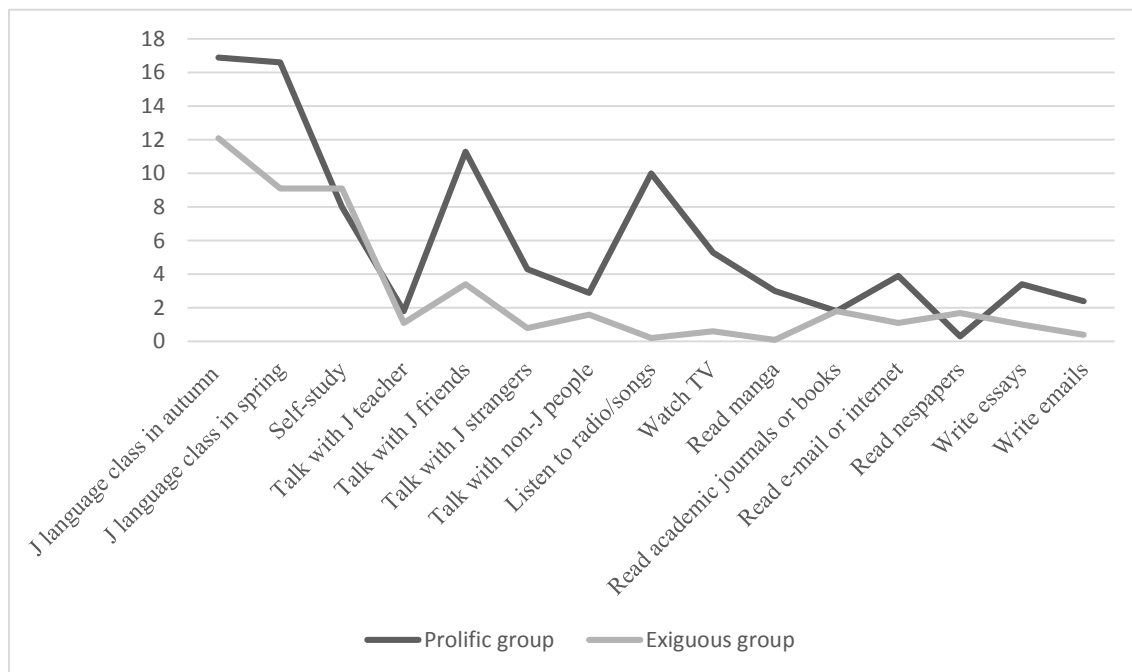


Figure 2. Self-reported average hours of Japanese use during SA (J = Japanese)

This figure shows that the prolific style group allegedly engaged with Japanese language considerably more than the exiguous style group during SA, exceeding the exiguous group in all items except ‘self-study’ and ‘reading newspapers’. In particular, although both groups engage with teachers to the same extent, the prolific group shows considerably more contact with Japanese friends (11.3 vs 3.4 hours on average).

5.2 Discussion

With regards to our first research question, that is, the usage patterns of *ne*, the findings of this study only partially confirm previous studies (cf. Ishida, 2009; Masuda, 2011; Sawyer, 1992) reporting that the use of *ne* slowly increases following SA. A relatively steady increase was found among learners in the exiguous group, who rarely used *ne* before SA. In contrast, there was considerable individual variability in the pattern of use of learners in the prolific group, who routinely deploy it already at the start. In an extreme case, Solon’s ratio of *ne* decreased by half after SA, from 44.7% at PRE to about 22% at POST-1 and POST-2. Considering the fact that the ratio of *ne* correlates with learners’ SPOT test scores at PRE and POST-2, the prediction of an increase is more likely to hold true for lower proficiency levels than the intermediate and advanced levels we observed.

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Quantitative measures arguably only tell part of the story, distinguishing mostly whether something is yet to appear in a learner's stable repertoire, rather than predicting frequency of use in every encounter, a measure which is naturally subject to the vagaries of the specific interaction.

Regarding research question 2 (i.e. if and how the SA context contributes to development), as our study did not have a control group, our observations remain speculative. However, our analysis of life-style factors did not provide evidence of the effect that could be intuitively anticipated (or desired, from a pedagogical point of view), i.e. more use of *ne* by those who reported more contact with the Japanese language. The group showing a relatively steady increase in the use of *ne* during and after SA is the exiguous style group, which according to this self-reported measure engaged quantitatively *less* with the Japanese language or with a range of Japanese 'others' (teachers, friends, strangers). This suggests, minimally, that amount of contact (even in the immersive context of SA) is not necessarily a decisive factor. The amount of contact is possibly less important than cognitive readiness (i.e. having worked out some meanings of the form) or again subjective and circumstantial factors, such as a more active interactional stance during the interview enabled by, for example, more confidence in one's linguistic skills (or, as in Matsumura, 2007, a different sense of self). Ishida's (2010, pp. 271–272) qualitative study also reports that no obvious difference was observed between learners who went on to SA and those who did not, in terms of evidence of development of interactional competence in conversation data.

In respect to question 3 (i.e. post-SA development), we observed all of the students maintain their use of *ne* during the interviews six-month after return from SA, but only the exiguous group increasing it, to the point that at POST-2 they 'catch up' (quantity-wise) with the prolific group. This could indicate that the more prolific users had reached an upper limit for a 'natural' use of *ne* in a context such as this kind of interview (one-to-one, with teacher, etc.) already at previous test points, whereas more room for use was available, in the shape of a more active stance, to the exiguous style users.⁷

Based on the above observations, we would suggest that, after a certain threshold in proficiency has been reached and the learner feels confident enough to positively submit *ne*-marked comments, the ratio of *ne* use mostly depends on how each learner wants to interactionally position himself/herself in conversation, based on contextual circumstances as well as the requirements of the particular conversation (including the relationship with the interlocutor, the subject matter, or the tone of the conversation). In order to explore the kind of stance which the use of *ne* enables our learners to display, we

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note the limitations of a purely quantitative measure of *ne* production and now turn to a qualitative discussion of our data.

6. Qualitative Study

This section focuses on the interactional performance of Lisa in the exiguous style group and Sakura in the prolific group. Because the speaker's stance during a conversation is subject to a myriad of circumstantial factors, we chose interviews with the same interlocutor (interviewer A at PRE and POST-2), so as to keep at least the participants' relation constant, and interviewees of the same gender.

6.1 Lisa (exiguous style user)

Lisa, from the exiguous style group, ranks middle in the SPOT scores for this group, and has never been to Japan before SA. Over the course of the four data collection points she moves toward a progressively greater use of *ne* (cf. Table 3). At PRE, all of the *ne* occurrences are in the set phrase '*soo desu ne*', but from DUR, non-formulaic uses begin to appear. Before we show these, by way of comparison, let us get a sense of Lisa's performance at PRE. We zoom in on her response to the first of the three set questions.

Excerpt 1: Lisa PRE⁸

- 1 Interviewer *Hai, Etto..., mazu hitotsume no shitsumon nan desu*
yes well for a start first Gen question Exp is
ga, etto,
but well
ryokoo wa sukidesu ka?
travel Top like Q
'Okay, um, so the first question is...um, do you like travelling?'
- 2 Lisa *Hai, sukidesu.*
Yes like
'Yes, I like it.'
- 3 Interviewer *U::n*
yeah
'Yeah.'
- 4 Lisa *Etto*
Well
'Well'
- 5 Interviewer *Un*
yes
'Yes.'
- 6 Lisa *Atarashii tokoro o miru no wa*
new place Acc see NM Top
'Going to new places'

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- 7 Interviewer *Un*
yes
'Yes.'
- 8 Lisa *Totemo omoshirokute*
very interesting
'is really interesting and'
- 9 Interviewer *U::n*
yeah
'Yeah.'
- 10 Lisa *Ettoo, e, tanoshii to omoimasu.*
well oh fun C think
'Well, yeah, and fun, I think.'
- 11 Interviewer *U::n*
yeah
'Yeah.'
- 12 Lisa *Hoka no, a::, bunka, i, ibunka ken* o
other Gen er culture, c, cross-cultural regions Acc
'Other, um, culture, cross-cultural regions'
- 13 Interviewer *U::n*
yeah
'Yeah.'
- 14 Lisa *A::, o taikensuru no wa*
er Acc experience NM Top
'Er, experiencing it [=different cultures] is'
- 15 Interviewer *U::n*
yeah
'Yeah.'
- 16 Lisa *U::n, ji, jibun no koto ni tsuite mo*
yeah, m, myself Gen thing Dat about also
'[to be able to learn] about myself'
- 17 Interviewer *E::*
yes
'yes'
- 18 Lisa *A::, yoku, a::, a::, manaberu*
Er well er er can-learn
'To be able to learn [about myself] well'
- 19 Interviewer *Un un un un un*
yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah
'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah'
- 20 Lisa *Node*
so
'So'
- 21 Interviewer *Un un un [un un]*
yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah
'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah'
- 22 Lisa *[sukidesu]*
like
'I like it.'
- 23 Interviewer *Soo desu ka. He::*
so is Q uh-huh
'I see, uh-huh.'
- 24 Lisa *Hai*
yes
'yes.'

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This particular excerpt, recorded at PRE, does not contain any instance of *ne*. At this point, simply answering the interviewer's questions is enough of a struggle for Lisa, and while she duly answers the interviewer's questions in full and in some detail, her contributions fail to signal a 'dialogic engagement'. As a result, the exchange seems to proceed with a stop-start rather than flowing rhythm. Her answer in line 2 (as the one in line 22) is, for example, an 'unmodalized' statement of her liking travel, more akin to an answer to an interrogation than a turn in a fairly casual conversation.⁹ It is not the case that Lisa struggles with modalization overall; she qualifies her statement in line 10 with *to omoimasu* '(I) think that'; however, while this utterance thus offers an indication of Lisa's opinion about traveling, it is not offered for further elaboration – a function supported by *ne* instead. Following Masuda (2011), we could say that Lisa fails to create a 'space for negotiation' for the interlocutors, or with Saigo (2011) that she did not attempt to present the new information as a 'ground' for the interlocutor to further comment on. As Saigo (2011, p. 207) notes, because the particles have no propositional value but only function as metapragmatic and metasequential markers, unexpected usages cause primarily *procedural* confusion. Indeed, the interviewer's backchannels in lines 3, 11, 23 indicate some temporization, in view of Lisa's minimised participation.

Lisa's performance at POST-2 (six months after SA and two years after PRE) is strikingly different. The passage below in Excerpt 2, just like the one in Excerpt 1, appears in the interviewer's very first question, but on this occasion Lisa's contribution is more fluent, engaged and natural:

Excerpt 2: Lisa POST-2

- 1 Interviewer *Saisho no shitsumon nan desu keredomo, e::tto,*
first Gen question Exp is but well
yonensei wa isogashikatta desu ka
4th year Top was-busy is Q
'So the first question, um, were you busy in your fourth year?'
- 2 Lisa *Kekko::, isogashi, isogashikatta*
Quite bus... was-busy
'I was quite, bu..busy...'
- 3 Interviewer *Aa, honto.*
Oh, really.
'Oh, really.'
- 4 Lisa *desu ne.*
is IP
[ne]
- 5 Interviewer *A::, so:: desu ka.*
Oh, so is Q
'Oh, I see.'
- 6 Lisa *Un*
Yeah
'Yeah.'

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- 7 Interviewer *Ja::, shu::matsu ni dokka deketari toka wa*
Then weekends on somewhere go-out or-something Top
amari dekinakattadesu ka?
not-much couldn't-do Q
'Then, you couldn't go out on weekends, could you?'
- 8 Lisa *Ma, toshokan gurai desu ne [@@@]*
Well, library only is IP
'Well, (I could go out for) the library only [laugh].'
- 9 Interviewer *[@@@]so:: desu ka.*
So is Q
'[laugh] I see.'
- 10 Interviewer *Ja, a, Rikyuu::-san mo toshokan [desu ne::] tte*
Then, ah, Rikyuu also library is IP C
yutteta node::
said because
'Then, oh, Rikyuu also said 'it's the library,' so...'
- 11 Lisa *[un]*
yeah
'Yeah'
- 12 Interviewer *A, so:: desu ka::, honto::, u::n*
Oh, so is Q really yeah
'Oh, I see. Really. Yeah.'
- 13 Interviewer *Ma, toshokan mo kireini natte,*
Well library also clean became
'Well, the library was newly built, so'
- 14 Lisa *Un*
Yeah
'Yeah.'
- 15 Interviewer *benkyo:: shiyasuku natta njanai desu ka?*
study easy-to-do became Exp-not is Q
'isn't it easier to study there then?'
- 16 Lisa *Un, ma::, kekko::*
Yeah, well, pretty much
'Well, yes, pretty much so.'
- 17 Interviewer *Un*
Yeah
'Yeah.'
- 18 Lisa *Ma, kirei desu shi*
Well clean is and
'well, it is clean, and'
- 19 Interviewer *Un*
Yeah
'Yeah.'
- 20 Lisa *nanka, ano::, ma, heya, heya de wa nanka*
like umm, well room room in Top like
'Umm, well, ... in my room'
- 21 Interviewer *Un*
Yeah
'Yeah.'
- 22 Lisa *Benkyo:: shinikui desu ne, nanka*
Study difficult-to-do is IP like
'it's kind of difficult to study...'
- 23 Interviewer *Un*
Yeah
'Yeah.'
- 24 Lisa *Itsumo nanka, gohan ga tabetai @@@*
Always like meal Nom want-to-eat

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- 25 Interviewer (I) always want to eat [laughter]
@@@ *so:: desu yone.*
So is IP
[laughter] that's right.'
- 26 Lisa *So:: so:: so::, toka shitari shimasu node*
Yeah yeah yeah like that do so
'Yeah, and do things like that, so'
- 27 Interviewer *Un, un, un*
Yeah yeah yeah
'Yeah, yeah, yeah'
- 28 Lisa *Nanka toshokan de wa*
Like library in Top
'in the library, like'
- 29 Interviewer *Un*
Yeah
'Yeah.'
- 30 Lisa *Ano shu::chu::*
Well concentration
'well, concentration'
- 31 Interviewer *Un*
Yeah
'Yeah.'
- 32 Lisa *Dekiru n de*
Can Exp so
'I can do, so'
- 33 Interviewer *Dekimasu yone*
Can IP
'(we) can do, can't we?'
- 34 Lisa *Un*
Yeah
'Yeah.'
- 35 Interviewer *So:: desu yone.*
So is IP
'That's right.'
- 36 Lisa *Hai.*
yes
'Yes.'
- 37 Interviewer *So::ka so::ka, so:: desu ka.*
I see I see so is Q
'I see, I see.'

Unlike her response to the first question in Excerpt 1, line 2, Lisa answered the question using *ne* in line 4 in Excerpt 2: *kekko isogashikatta desu ne* 'I've been relatively busy'. To answer the question literally and merely factually, Lisa does not need to use *ne* here, but *ne* effectively invites her interlocutor's reaction, evident in the uptake and the follow up question. By using *ne* Lisa submits her assessment of a situation, and positively pushes the conversation forward. Similarly, replying to the follow-up question in line 7: 'So, you couldn't go out somewhere over the weekends?', rather than giving a literal and minimal answer: 'No, I couldn't.', Lisa again uses *ne* to draw the interviewer's attention to the new information she offers '(I went to) just about the library'. Line 22 shows how Lisa qualifies her own opinion in relation to the interviewer's suggestion in line 15. We could

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indeed see these instances as presenting propositional content that Lisa arrived at as a result of some reflection (Takubo & Kinsui, 1997), but beyond merely manifesting her epistemic stance, through *ne* Lisa indexes her interactional stance as a co-contributor to the conversation. There are 20 instances like this in total including one instance at DUR, eight at POST-1 and 11 at POST-2 (including those in Excerpt 2 above), showing that Lisa has learned to ‘package’ information in a way that draws the hearer in, and invites further assessment (a deliberate invitation to ‘involvement’ in Lee (2007)). The energetic response thus triggered (cf. the acknowledgment of mutual epistemic stance by the interviewer in lines 25, 33 and 35) indeed generates a sense of participants engaged in ‘joint intentional activities’ (Katagiri, 2007, p. 1316).

6.2 Sakura (prolific style user)

Turning now to the prolific group, we examine Sakura as a comparison case. She is a top scorer in the SPOT ranking for the group, but she too had never been to Japan before SA. Her use of *ne* over the four data sets also increases after moving to Japan (cf. Table 3). The following excerpt comes from the session at PRE and shows part of Sakura’s answer to the first question: ‘where is the best place you have ever been?’:

Excerpt 3: Sakura PRE

- | | | |
|---|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Sakura | <i>Watashi no kazoku to isshoni</i>
I Gen family and with
‘With my family’ |
| 2 | Interviewer | <i>U::n.</i>
<i>Uh</i>
‘Uh’ |
| 3 | Sakura | <i>Ikimashita.</i>
went
‘(I) went’ |
| 4 | Interviewer | <i>A, [honto]</i>
Oh really
‘Oh really’ |
| 5 | Sakura | <i>[hai]</i>
yes
‘Yes.’ |
| 6 | Interviewer | <i>So:: desu ka. He::, sore wa yokattadesu ne::.</i>
So is Q I see that Top was-good IP
‘Is that so? I see. That’s good.’ |
| 7 | Sakura | <i>Hai.</i>
yes
‘Yes.’ |
| 8 | Sakura | <i>Hai @@@</i>
yes
‘Yes [laughter]’ |

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- 9 Interviewer *Ja, sono, basho ga yokatta toyu:: yorimo, minna*
Then well place Nom was-good C than everyone
de itta no ga tanoshikatta toyu:: koto desu ka?
with went NM Nom was-fun C thing is Q
'Then, does that mean that it was fun to go with everyone rather than that you liked the place itself?'
- 10 Sakura *Ma::, ryo::ho:: desu ne.*
Well both is IP
'Well, both, I think.'
- 11 Interviewer *U::n, honto::.*
Uh really
'Uh, really.'

Sakura is a frequent user of *ne* even at PRE, and the instance of *ne* observed in line 10 above in Excerpt 3 is comparable to the use of *ne* in line 4, Excerpt 2 produced by Lisa at POST-1 (also in the nuance that the information offered is the result of some 'computation'). This indicates that already at PRE, Sakura knew how to present an assessment as information to be treated as common ground, and inviting the interlocutor's alignment to it, thus taking an active role in the co-construction of discourse.

At POST-2, Sakura's use of *ne* is increasingly fluent. Excerpt 4 shows the passage in which the interviewer asks her about the most influential person.

Excerpt 4: Sakura POST-2

- 1 Interviewer *@@@ so:: desu ka. Ano demo, yappari shu::matsu wa*
so is Q well but as expected weekend Top
dokoka dekake taritoka so::yu:: koto wa
somewhere go out things-like such thing Top
[dekimashita]?
could
'[laughter] I see. But well, could you go out or do such things during weekends?'
- 2 Sakura *[A], tokidoki wa [shimashita ne].*
oh sometimes Top did IP
'Oh, I sometimes did.'
- 3 Interviewer *[un], [u::n].*
yeah Umm
'Yeah. Umm.'
- 4 Sakura *[ma] tomodachi to*
well friend with
'well, with my friend'
- 5 Interviewer *Un, un.*
Yeah yeah
'Yeah, yeah'
- 6 Sakura *Ma, nomini it tari*
Well to dring go do things like that
'well, went out for a drink'
- 7 Interviewer *[He::]*
I see
'I see'
- 8 Interviewer *[kaimono] shini it tari*
shopping to do go do things like that

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‘went out for shopping and something like that’

By using *ne* in line 2, Sakura answers the interviewer’s question promptly and economically. Sakura does not wait for the interviewer to complete the question, as shown in the overlapped utterances in lines 1 and 2, and moreover goes on to provide additional information. Thus *ne* not only directs the hearer’s attention to the proposition preceding it (‘yes, sometimes I did go out’) but also possibly acts as a pre-sequence: having prepared the ground with her confirmation, with a few subsequent turns from line 4 onward, she enriches her account (duly acknowledged by her interlocutor, including a *hee* in line 7 flagging up the informativeness of her contribution).

Furthermore, at POST-2 Sakura manages an even more confident interactional positioning. Before the passage quoted here as Excerpt 5, Sakura had said that her boyfriend lived in a place called *Itabashi*, which prompted the interviewer’s comment that her grandmother’s house (a stationary shop) was also in *Itabashi*.

Excerpt 5: Sakura POST-2

- 1 Interviewer *Un so::.. Bunbo::guya san o [yatteta n desu*
Yeah, umm. Stationary shop Acc did Exp is
kedo. E::]
but hmm
‘Yeah, umm. (they) run a stationary shop, hmm.’
- 2 Sakura *[A, so:: nan desu ka]*
Oh, so Exp is Q
‘Oh, is that so?’
- 3 Interviewer *Ima [tabun mo:::]*
Now probably anymore
‘Now, probably, (they don’t run it) anymore’
- 4 Sakura *[he::]*
Uh-huh
‘Uh-huh’
- 5 Interviewer *Yattenai n[janai kana::?]*
Do-not Exp-not IP
‘I guess (they) don’t run it’
- 6 Sakura *[a::]*
well
‘Well’
- 7 Interviewer *Demo fu:::n so:: nan da::*
But well so Exp is
‘But, well. I see’
- 8 Sakura *Hai*
Yes
‘Yes’
- 9 Interviewer *He::*
Uh-huh

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- ‘Uh-huh’
- 10 Sakura *Gu::zen desu ne [@@@]*
Coincidence is IP
‘That’s a coincidence (laughter)’
- 11 Interviewer [*Gu::zen desu ne @@@*] *E::, so :: desu ka. Ja ja*
Coincidence is IP Well, so is Q Then then
etto muko:: ni itte, oshigoto toka sareru no ?
umm there to go job etc. do-Hon Exp?
‘That’s a coincidence (laughter). Well, I see. Then, then, will you go there and work?’

Line 10 is notable in showing Sakura introducing an unsolicited assessment marked by *ne*, ‘*guuzen desu ne* (That’s a coincidence)’. This is very effective in projecting the hearer’s alignment in the next turn, evidenced by the interlocutor’s repetition of the assessment as well as her mirroring of Sakura’s laughter.

Incidentally, a very similar case is observable in Lisa’s (exiguous style group) POST-2 dataset. Over the course of about 24 turns, the interviewer had commented on gender inequality in today’s Japan in a way which clearly indicated her frustration with the current state of affairs; Lisa had provided appropriate backchannels all along, when she then produced a spontaneous conclusive *ne*-marked assessment: *madamada desu ne* (‘we are still a long way [from full equality]’!). Lisa can offer this assessment because she has understood her interlocutor’s moral or political stance, and is confident not only in stating her own assessment of the situation, but also in inviting, with *ne*, the interlocutor’s alignment in the following turn – which duly arrives, with a repetition of the assessment *madamada desu ne*. We should note, however, that this is the only unsolicited assessment *ne* in Lisa’s (exiguous group) whole dataset, in contrast with Sakura’s (prolific group) who can produce this even from PRE.

6.3 Final observations on the qualitative analysis

The analysis of conversation illustrates how the particle *ne* affords the speaker, among other resources, an instrument for the discursive management of one’s interactional position. Our qualitative analysis illustrates how, through *ne*, learners could emancipate themselves from relatively passive participant positions, mostly responding to the interlocutor’s prompts, and achieve more active and even proactive positions, claiming increased agency in the co-construction of the exchange.

The performances of the two learners examined, Lisa and Sakura, who we presented as representatives of the two groups differing in production rates, show how the presence or absence of *ne* can affect the very nature of the interaction. Through the

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use of an IP which displays the speaker's alignment or invites the interlocutors' alignment, learners were able to create an intersubjective space indexing their interactional orientation beyond the specificities of the propositional content (or rather superimposed on them). By flagging up their interactional stance in the conversation, the learners positioned themselves as legitimate co-participants, and transformed the very exchanges from unilaterally directed interviews to bilaterally managed conversations.

It is not possible to establish unequivocally to what extent confidence in linguistic skills enables a confident interactional stance (the kind of engaged stance marked by *ne*), but our qualitative data show the performance of the prolific style learner before the SA to be very similar to that of the exiguous style learner after SA. In other words, prolific users appear to be able to have worked out *ne*'s potential for interactional positioning (e.g., a mutual alignment) prior to the immersive experience abroad¹⁰, and to be using it productively whenever circumstantial need arises. The exiguous group would need more time to reach the same level (in terms of amount and range of use), and while this time covers the period spent abroad, it is not clear from our data that the crucial factor for this development is the SA as learning context, rather than just more learning time. Both groups appear to control a diverse range of functions after SA: agreeing with the interlocutors' statements, giving opinions marked by *ne* in answer to the interlocutor's questions, using *ne*-marked statements to invite and project alignment in the following turns, and producing unsolicited *ne*-marked assessments. However, we are inclined to conclude that what the learners need to work out is *ne*'s common meaning of 'interactional alignment' and that the above, more specific 'functions' are emergent meanings derived from the interaction of *ne* with specific contexts of use.

At the current stage of our analysis, still in progress, we are unable to make strong claims with regards to developmental stages, but we wish to submit some brief observations in this respect. Sawyer (1992) among others observes that *ne* generally appears in the formulaic expression *soo desu ne* in the early stages, followed by *ne* in non-formulaic expressions. Stages such as these cannot be detected in our prolific group, since they all used both formulaic and non-formulaic *ne* throughout the data collection points from PRE to POST-2. Looking at the relevant items in the exiguous group, non-formulaic *ne* was produced even in the absence of formulaic *ne*, and even by the least frequent users. As shown in Table 3, for example, Tani at PRE used no formulaic expression but two instances of non-formulaic *ne*, and Rikyuu at POST-2 produced five non-formulaic *ne* when he did not use any formulaic one at all. Our prolific users use formulaic slightly more than non-formulaic *ne*, and more variability in the 'mix' of formulaic/non-formulaic *ne* is observed as we move toward exiguous style users, but most

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of our learners, with just a handful of exceptions, in fact use both forms in each session – in bigger or smaller ‘absolute’ amounts depending on frequency of use, but in very similar proportions. Thus, as far as our post-beginner level learners are concerned, the developmental pattern observed for the beginners is not applicable; at this stage of development, both formulaic and non-formulaic uses appear to have been appropriated, and are not ‘lost’ despite infrequent overall use.

7. Conclusions

This study explored signs of development of interactional competence, as indexed by the use of the particle *ne*, in L2 learners of Japanese during and after SA. It is true, as noted by Ishida (2009) and Masuda (2009, 2011), that quantitative analyses are blind to local context, without which *ne* cannot possibly be interpreted. The subjective nature of the interactional stance indexed by *ne* means that its presence/absence cannot be predicted, especially in spontaneous unscripted conversational contexts, and its measurement is subject to the effects of a myriad of contextual (social, psychological, circumstantial) factors. Our quantitative analysis, however, suggested that proficiency is at least in part a precondition for the use of *ne*, presumably in terms of a certain level of lexical and grammatical competence as well as efficiency in online processing. But we should qualify this statement by noting that the effect of proficiency is likely more significant at lower levels (as indeed in Masuda’s (2011) study). After a certain threshold, which we would roughly place at a higher intermediate level, learners appear to deploy *ne* in an increasing range of contexts and functions. Because learners are rarely taught this feature in formal instruction (and when they are, it is unlikely to be in terms of the “interactional alignment” function described here) and moreover, because the formal classroom context possibly provides fewer opportunities for use compared to ordinary conversation (Ohta 1994, p. 314-5), it is likely that the learners come to understand its function unconsciously, as a result of exposure to an increasing range of different contexts including extra-curricular activities.

Our study also provides evidence of further development in the period following SA, during which most students (with a few exceptions) either increase or maintain existing levels of *ne* use. Almost all of those who were using *ne* only occasionally before or during SA, approximate group-average levels in the 6 months after return, where the two groups behave very similarly.

Our study could not confirm Masuda’s (2011) finding that “a study abroad program provides a valuable developmental experience that can accelerate JFL learners’ acquisition of interactional competence.” Despite its intuitive appeal, because we found

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the group reporting more interaction to be the group changing less, we cannot claim a strong role for the experience abroad. A bias in learners' self-reports could of course be responsible for this unexpected outcome, but another possibility is that because enhanced interactional competence presumably manifests itself first and foremost in terms of a qualitative change in the speaker's stance in the conversation, quantitative correlates are simply not reliable indicators. Further research is necessary to explore this hypothesis.

The participation framework in an activity such as the "research interview" would inevitably prevent learners from considering themselves on an equal footing with the interviewers, and it is not surprising that they showed a more passive role at the outset. However, the qualitative changes we have observed in our learners' behavior over the four sessions lead us to hypothesise that, along with increased linguistic proficiency, the very change in relationship among participants, becoming less formal over time, the increased familiarity with the task, and even a sense of shared knowledge relating to their experience in Japan, allowed a space for the learners to claim a more active role in the interaction. Rather than attempting to demonstrate a causal relationship with specific, single factors, we note that most learners – regardless of what they were able to do at the start of the study – were able to demonstrate a masterful use of *ne* at the end of the four sessions two years later, to signal (mostly appropriately though sometimes not fully so) such increased agency. The intermediate-high level thus appears to be a crucial phase for gaining and practicing control of the particle *ne*.

The small sample of 10 students is a limitation of the current study with implications for both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Specific idiosyncrasies in any of the interviews may have skewed overall measures and our appreciation of the students' abilities.¹¹ Because of the pragmatic nature of *ne* use, future research can only benefit from the observation of data from spontaneous conversations with different types of interlocutors in a variety of social settings, and not limited to semi-structured oral interviews.

The observations on more advanced proficiency learners in this study qualify earlier generalisations about learning trajectories, and problematise the role of SA experience in the development of *ne* as an index of interactional competence. Further exploration of correlations between *ne* and other modal markers would arguably enhance such observations, but we will leave this for our future research.

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¹ While we are aware that a distinction has been made in previous literature between ‘second’ and ‘foreign’ language learners, this paper calls them second language (L2) learners for convenience sake.

² As can be appreciated through the literature review section, a straightforward translation of the modal particle *ne* into English is not possible. The particle has no referential meaning, and the English gloss we offer above is but an approximation of one of its many indexical functions.

³ Masuda’s (2009, p. 343) study of IPs in one-to-one conversations between six Japanese college students and their teachers reports *ne* to be the most frequently used (45.7%, compared to *yo* 29.3%; *yone* 17.3%, *kana* 5.2% and *kane/kana* 2.5 %).

⁴ This variation is due to the fact that three out of ten participants (Solon, Fubuki and Sakura) had prior knowledge of Japanese and entered the programme from the second year, while the other seven participants started from the first year. The syllabus covered at the end of the second year and prior to SA was therefore nominally the same for all participants, although variation in command of such content could be expected.

⁵ Mimi is half Japanese and visited her relatives in Japan frequently before SA. However, she declared that she did not use Japanese at home and her first language was English.

⁶ Although POST-1 SPOT results do not significantly correlate with *ne*, they do correlate if we only focus on sentence-final *ne* after excluding the formulaic *soo desu ne* (PRE: $r=0.75$, $*p=.01$, POST-1: $r=0.69$ $*p=.03$, POST-2: $r=0.60$ $*p=.07$). The weaker correlation with POST-2 is likely due to the convergence of proficiency between the two groups and the possible ceiling effect.

⁷ The case of Tani in the exiguous group is emblematic: his SPOT test score increases only slightly but remains low even after SA (72% at PRE; 74% at POST-2) compared to other learners in the exiguous style group (whose score increases from 68%-82% at PRE to more than 90% at POST-2). Tani’s ratio of *ne* also remained the lowest (4.5% at POST-2) while other students in the exiguous group approximate the pattern of the prolific group (8.2%-17.3%) at POST-2. This suggests that a certain proficiency level is a threshold that must be reached before *ne* becomes available.

⁸ The transcription conventions and abbreviations used in this paper are as follows:

. = falling intonation, ? = rising intonation, : : = lengthened segment, [] = overlapping, @@@ = laughter, Acc = accusative marker, C = quotation marker, Dat = dative marker, Exp = explanatory marker, Gen = genitive marker, Hon = honorific, NM = nominalizer, Nom = nominative marker, Q = question marker, IP = interactional particle, Top = topic marker

⁹ Of course Lisa’s framing of the interview may be rather different: rather than a casual conversation she may have felt as though she was being tested. However, her contribution is appropriate to the question only content-wise: she is describing what she likes about traveling and submitting more information than yes/no answers; however, this propositional appropriateness is arguably not matched by procedural appropriateness.

¹⁰ This is in spite of the shorter amount of instruction our learners received: Lisa in the exiguous group had 2 years of tuition before SA, and Sakura just one (as noted in section 4.1 and footnote 4).

¹¹ For example, our most prolific user, Solon, shows a record production in the first

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session but then a steady decrease over time (44%, 30%, 22%, 22%). There is no ‘loss’ of ability of course, but just a different ‘tone’ over the sessions, each of which, as we noted elsewhere, is a unique event.