

Aizuchi and *ma* (pause) in online interactions of
distance learning classes of Japanese:
an empirical study

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In recent years, classes and project works that involve online communication between foreign language learners of Japanese and Japanese native speakers have increasingly taken place. In a video call, in order to have a fluent conversation it is necessary to be able to use appropriate *aizuchi* and to take pauses accordingly. Considering that the ability to communicate remotely in foreign language learning will be increasingly important in the future, this is a valuable attempt to convey the cultural context of the local learner in a global environment. It is well known that *aizuchi* tends to be used more frequently in modern Japanese than in other languages during conversation. Non-monotone *aizuchi* used with high frequency leads to good communication, and its frequency of use by learners has been considered, by previous research, a way to measure language proficiency. In this study, I analyze the use of *aizuchi* and pause/interval *ma* in remote conversations between Italian learners of Japanese language and Japanese native speakers in Japan. This kind of research on remote communication between foreign language learners and native speakers provides important suggestions to ease distance language learning in the future.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, many language practitioners are incorporating intercultural communication as a goal and practice of language teaching (Byram 1997, Kramsch 1993). Telecollaboration (TC), terminology used in reference to virtual exchanges, can facilitate such intercultural exchange. TC has been defined as institutionalized, electronically mediated intercultural communication under the guidance of a language expert (i.e. teacher) for the purpose of FL learning, including the improvement of language skills, intercultural communicative competence and digital literacies (Belz 2003, Guth and Helm 2010). In recent years, project works in which learners of the Japanese language interact directly with Japanese native speakers (NSs) in Japan using the Internet have become quite frequent and are considered valuable attempts to directly convey the local learner's cultural background in a global environment. The ability to remotely communicate in a foreign language will become increasingly

important in the future. However, in virtual exchanges it is necessary to take appropriate pauses in order to facilitate the conversation.

Several problems can arise when using the Internet to talk to someone. In case of video calls where there is a fixed camera (i.e. a pc monitor, etc.) between two persons, it usually happens that if the speaker's gaze, which has the important role to signal the timing for turn taking, is (technically) hard to catch, the interaction may not proceed smoothly, and linguistic signals become most important.

In this study, I analyze the use of *aizuchi* and pause *ma* in remote conversations between Italian learners of the Japanese language and NSs in Japan in an Internet-based project work (Hayashi, Kunimura, Carpi 2019), with a focus on the learners.

2. Literature review

In spontaneous conversation, a listener can take turns by asking and answering to questions, elaborating or confirming the speaker's statements, or causing a topic shift. Alternatively, he/she may support the speaker in continuing the conversation. This can be achieved by non-verbal means, such as eye and head movement, or even silence, or short phrases (White 1986). These supportive behaviors are called *aizuchi* (Mizutani 1988), backchannels responses (Yngve 1970), or continuer and assessment (Schegloff 1982). More specifically, *aizuchi* is a Japanese word that refers to listeners' short responses used to indicate their listenership (Maynard 1986). Previous studies on Japanese linguistics reveal that *aizuchi* appear in a variety of forms and serve multiple functions; moreover, a number of social factors affect the way *aizuchi* is used. Although NSs of Japanese seem to use this highly complex pragmatic feature with ease, there is a great deal of individual variation, which results in a varied impression of individuals as good or poor listeners (Ohama 2006). This naturally leads to the question of how well L2 learners acquire and use *aizuchi* in Japanese conversation.

Whereas Japanese NSs have the reputation for using *aizuchi* to demonstrate active listenership, they are also known for using silence to achieve communicative goals. While silence may be seen an apparently passive act of conversation, it can signal various social functions such as difficulties in articulating a thought, technical problems, etc. In addition, previous studies have found that Japanese NSs use silence both as a negative politeness strategies, when it functions as a distancing tactic, and as a positive politeness strategy, when it functions as a sign of solidarity and rapport (Sifianou 1997, Nakane 2006). Sifianou (1997: 73) also claims that while silence has a positive value in avoiding imposition, it can also be "the least polite" form because it "places high inferential demands on the addressee." In her analysis of politeness in intercultural communication, Sifianou (1992: 216) argues

that communication problems are more likely to occur among participants from different socio-cultural backgrounds, due to gaps in “the tacit agreement among native speakers as to which forms are conventionalized, which forms carry what degree and what kind of politeness.”

Together with *aizuchi*, one of the most salient characteristics of Japanese spoken dialogues are the so-called sentence-final particles such as *ne* and *yo* (Katagiri 2007), closely related to the use of *aizuchi* (Kita and Ide 2007). They are extremely frequent in spoken utterances, even mandatory in some cases to produce natural conversational utterances, but never appear in formal written discourse. The final particles can be typically attached to the end of a postpositional phrase, in the middle of an utterance, or attached to an adverb, or a clause. Japanese linguists have provided a classification of sentence-final particles in terms of the types of information they convey and the communicative functions they serve besides the propositional contents of the sentences to which they are attached. These communicative functions include assertion, question, confirmation, assent, inhibition and exclamation (Katagiri 2007). One of their functions, especially for the particle *ne*, is to elicit *aizuchi* from the listener, but they can also be used independently as an *aizuchi* utterance (Kita and Ide 2007). Thus, final particles and *aizuchi* together shape the interaction between the turn-holder and the listener in the way characteristic of Japanese conversation.

2.1. Japanese *aizuchi* and *ma* in FL learning

It has been found that NSs of Japanese transfer the pragmatic features of their Japanese listening-behaviors into English and therefore these are interpreted as frequent interruptions of the speakers' speech rather than supportive behavior (Maynard 1993). Conversely, researchers also found that FL learners of Japanese transfer their first language (L1) listening strategies into Japanese (Nagata 2004, Watanabe 1994, Yang 2001).

Another noteworthy difference between FL learners and NSs is that learners tend to misinterpret the functions of *aizuchi* and use them in a restricted manner (Hatasa 2007). Previous studies on *aizuchi* use demonstrate that learners acquire *aizuchi* rather slowly, and they may not achieve a native-like competence in the use of this feature.

However, what is mostly relevant to this study is that FL learners have very limited opportunities to interact with Japanese NSs or to be exposed to *aizuchi* outside the classroom. This means that FL learners' acquisition may be affected not only by the learners' L1, but also by the input they receive in the FL classroom.

Regardless of the virtual exchange, previous research has emphasized that appropriate *aizuchi* and *ma* are important for smoother conversation. According to Yang (1997: 117) *aizuchi* play an

important role in the progress of conversation in Japanese, but it will hardly be easy for learners to learn them. Even in the case of foreign learners who have studied Japanese for many years and who have mastered the language, this does not necessarily imply that they can always make good use of *aizuchi*.

As it has been pointed out in many previous studies, *aizuchi* tend to be used more frequently in Japanese than in other languages (Mizutani 1988, Maynard 1993, Clancy et al. 1996), and are regarded as "caring" behavior (Maynard 1993). A simple extension of this idea is that "high-frequency, non-monotonic variants lead to good communication (at least in Japanese):" in fact, *aizuchi* is often considered a way to measure learners' proficiency in Japanese (Yang 1997, Sasaki 2002, etc.).

According to the literature, *ma* (pauses) tend to be longer in Japanese than in other languages, and their length changes according to the utterance speed of the other party. In addition, learners' pauses are often very short: this is related to the learner's abilities in the Japanese language. It is said in fact that "Japanese proficiency" has a high correlation with "how to take pauses." Furthermore, *ma* is also used as one of the evaluation criteria for the objective evaluation of Japanese oral proficiency interviews (ACTFL-OPI). Despite this, how to take pause in a conversation with a Japanese speaker is usually not included in the syllabus of a Japanese language course.

In order to understand a conversation, it is necessary to interpret not only the actions of the parties involved, but also the situations in which those actions are performed; if not, the situation is harder to grasp due to the lack of contextual information. In research on spoken speech, it may seem that the interval/pause can be perceived simply as a "time zone without speech," but recognizing *ma* is not so easy (Shukuri, Vaage *et al.* 2018).

As the literature suggests, dealing with different turn-taking conventions that are shaped by cultures, status and power may result in intercultural tensions, resulting in participants judge their interlocutor negatively. Moreover, what makes virtual exchanges even more difficult is the mediation of technology. Past research has shown that regulating turns in a video-mediated context often results in more pauses and interruption than face-to-face interaction (Bitti & Garotti 2011). This is because managing speakership/listenership poses more challenges when participants do not have the affordances of physical co-presence such as the direction of gaze, gestures and body movement (Jenks 2014, Jenks and Brandt 2013). For instance, because of the fixed position of the webcam at the top of the screen, previous research claims that real eye-contact does not exist online (Kern 2014). It has also been reported that transmission delays impact perceived communication difficulties and participants' emotions (Parkinson & Lea 2011) and that the timing when a pause starts to be perceived as troublesome depends on the modes of communication (Kozar 2016).

Potential issues may further arise when interlocutors lack familiarity with such Japanese listenership conventions. It should be noted that communication breakdowns can also occur due to differences in language proficiency (Hatasa 2007).

3. Outline and purpose of the research

This research was born out of a collaborative study between three countries (Japan, France and Italy) that gathered under a wider, unprecedented large-scale project called 「面白い話」で世界をつなぐ ‘*Omoshiroi hanashi*’ *de sekai o tsunagu* (Connecting through funny stories) represented by Sadanobu Toshiyuki (University of Kyoto) and funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPC) and part of the Global Network for Japanese Language Education (GN), with the specific aim to connect learners of Japanese language around the world.¹

This specific group of research represented by Kōbe University, University of Rennes and University of Milan, whose aim is to promote intercultural understanding and Japanese communicative skills, involved five Italian and nine French students studying Japanese language in bachelor and master degree courses, paired with twelve Japanese students in small teams of 1on1 or 1on2. They were assigned the task to co-produce a video about the theme “My funny stories”, one of the topics from the large-scale project mentioned above. The participants exchanged opinions on “What are funny stories to me?” communicating through e-mails, SNS, Skype or Google Hangouts and sharing video materials, and eventually collaborating to the realization of a video with which they had to explain what they considered “funny” (e.g. their final task).

The aim of the current study was to observe and analyze the use of *aizuchi* and *ma* in natural conversation among learners of Japanese language and Japanese NSs. The analysis was restricted only to the dyads (four) from which the researchers could collect full data. The four pairs were made up of four Italian learners of Japanese and four Japanese NSs. Learners' Japanese language proficiency ranged from A2 to B2 (Council of Europe 2011). The task required that both sides searched online for interesting videos displaying the concept of “funny” as conceived according to their own culture, and shared them and discussed about it through several sessions of virtual exchange.

¹ For further details about the project see <http://www.speech-data.jp/chotto/gn.html> (30.4.2020). Audio and video and materials collected through this project can be used as online teaching materials to improve learners' oral communication skills, as well as Japanese and learners' native language speech styles. They can also be used as comparative research data on humor and laughter.

A corpus of 13 dialogues, about three or four dialogues for each pair, of about 60 minutes length each, was analyzed. For the analysis two types of data were collected:

1. Conversation data of four dyads by Japanese and Italian learners co-producing a video on the topic "funny stories"

→ discussion through SNS and Google Hangouts with a peer about “what is interesting to me”, sharing videos about the topic and eventually creating a video explaining their views on the topic.

2. Video-recorded data of the conversations on Google Hangouts, carried out during non-class hours

→ focus on the presence of *aizuchi* and *ma*, as well as the misunderstandings or breakdowns due to the lack of them that, consequently, hindered communication smoothness

3.1. Data

Due to space limits, this paragraph presents three different excerpts that may be looked at as representative of three different patterns observed in the corpus. They are taken from the virtual exchanges by two of the four dyads, and they are characterized by several episodes of miscommunication or stagnation of the conversation. The selection of the excerpts has been made to put in evidence how the use, in virtual exchanges, of *aizuchi* and *ma* by learners of the Japanese language may impact comprehension and conversation flow with NSs.

Dyad 1 was formed, on one side, by an Italian (male) NS speaker (IM1) with elementary level of Japanese proficiency (A2) and no prior stay in Japan. and by a Japanese (female) NS (JF1) who had previous study experience in Italy and could speak some Italian.

Dyad 2 was composed by an Italian (female) NS (IF2) with upper intermediate level of Japanese proficiency (B2) and previous two months study experience in Japan, and, by a Japanese (female) NS with no knowledge of Italian language.

Participants to the projects were allowed to use whatever language they preferred during the exchange as far as they could convey what they needed to carry out the task.

3.1.1. Excerpt 1 from dyad 1

The following script is an excerpt from a video conversation between IM1 and JF1 (Figure 1).

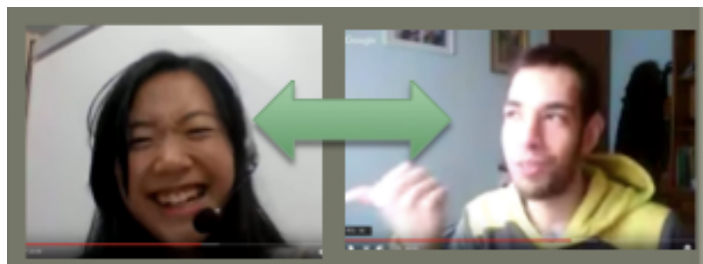


Figure 1: Dyad 1 (JF1 and IM1, respectively S and M)

Line	Student S (JF1)	Student M (IM1)
1	私の気づいたことを言ってもいいですか? <i>watashi no ki zuita koto o itte mo iidesuka?</i> ("May I tell you what I realized?")	
2		Mmmh... sì OK ("Hmm... yes ok") [M doesn't look as if he understood]
3	Posso dirti cosa penso in italiano? ("May I tell you what I think in Italian?")	
4		あー、 Sì、 はい <i>āa, sì, hai</i> ("Uh, yes, yes") [shrugging, as if he does not care much about the translation]
5	えーっと、イタリア人がー、パロラッチャ <i>ē-tto, itarijin ga - paroraccha</i> ("Hmm, Italians ... [swear word]") [It. "parolaccia" is translated with 罵りことば <i>namari kotoba</i> ("swear words") in Japanese]	
6		ん n ("Hmm") [laughs and looks amused and puzzled by the fact that his partner knows that word in Italian]
7	わらう、笑うのはー、その <i>warau, warau no ha - sono</i> ("(They) laugh, (their) laughing... that")	
8		はい <i>hai</i> ("Yes")
9	わかりーわかりやすくてー面白いから、、、でしょ? <i>wakari -- wakari yasukutte - omoshiroi kara ... deshō?</i>	

	(“It’s easy... easy to understand ... since they ² are funny, right?”) [laughs]	
10		そう思います <i>sō omoimasu</i> (“I think so”)
11	うんうんうん <i>un un un</i> (“Hmm hmm hmm”)	
12	その、日本人が一、なんだろう、あの、ダンスとかの一、変なダンス、変な踊りで笑うのとかも一 <i>sono, nihonjin ga --, nan darō, ano, dansu toka no--, henna dansu, henna odori de warau no toka mo -</i> (“Well, those Japanese... I wonder, well, also the fact that they laugh for a dance, a funny dance, a strange dance...”)	
13		はい、わかった、わかった <i>hai, wakatta, wakatta</i> (“Yes, I got it, I got it”) [looks amused but misunderstands what his partner is talking about, thinking that “strange dance” is the topic]
14	ん一、すごいわかりやすくて一、なんだろう、見ただけとか、聞いただけで、なんてか、面白いって感じる分かりやすい笑いだからかな一って <i>n - sugoi wakariyasukute - nan darō, mita dake ka, kīta dake de nan teka, omoshiroi tte kanjiru wakariyasui warai da kara kana - tte</i> (“Hmmm... well maybe because it’s really easy to understand, I guess, just by watching it, just by listening to it, somehow, you laugh because you feel it’s funny and easy to understand...”)	
15		大丈夫、大丈夫 <i>daijōbu, daijōbu</i> (“Alright, alright”) [meaning “I see, I see”]
16	うん <i>un</i> (“Hmm”)	
17		... [proceeds to talk in Italian about dance comedy, <i>manzai</i>]

Table 1: IM1 and JF1 in dyad 1 (first exchange)

² It refers to “swear words.”

In the exchange above, the participants are talking about what makes them laugh when watching TV and JF1 has just shared a video about *manzai*.³ Table 1 shows how JF1, in order to explain what she wants to convey to his peer, slowly separates and partially rephrases sentences, using a variety of fillers (highlighted words). JF1 is explaining some features of *manzai* but IM1, does not understand that she is still talking about the same subject (*manzai*) and not a “strange dance” (line 12 変なダンス *henna dansu*) instead. She continues her talk as he utters two different types of *aizuchi*: “ ah, yes” (line 4 あー、 Sì、 はい *ā, sì, hai*), “yes” (line 8 はい *hai*) and “yes, I have understood, understood” (line 13 はい、 わかった、 わかった *hai, wakatta, wakatta*), “ok, it’s fine” (lines 15 大丈夫、 大丈夫 *daijōbu, daijōbu*) that sounds as if he has understood.

This excerpt represents a case in which a learner, with limited language competences, interact with a NS using monotone *aizuchi*, thus (unconsciously?) displaying understanding and allowing the interlocutor to proceed with her talk even if his understanding of the content may be limited.

3.1.2. Excerpt 2 from dyad 1

The following script is the second excerpt from a video conversation between IM1 and JF1.

Line	Student S (JF2)	Student M (IM2)
1	M が言いたかったことはー? <i>M ga itakatta koto ha?</i> (“What did you want to say?”)	
2		ん? n? (“Uh?”) [doesn’t understand]
3	M が言いたかったことはー? <i>M ga itakatta koto ha -?</i> (“What did you want to say?”)	
4		言いたかったことはー、えー、 <i>itakatta koto ha - ē...</i> (“What I wanted to say ... hmm...”)
5	芸人、芸人は、えーっとー <i>geinin, geinin ha, ē-tto-</i> (“Entertainers, entertainers, well hmm...”)	
6		あ、イタリア語で「comico」だ <i>a, itariago de “comico” da</i> (“Ah, in Italian is ‘comico’”)
7	うん、そうそうそう、OK <i>un, sō sō sō, OK</i>	

³ *Manzai* (漫才) is a traditional style in Japanese culture similar to double act comedy or stand-up comedy. *Manzai* usually involves two performers – a straight man (*tsukkomi*) and a funny man (*boke*) – trading jokes at great speed. Most of the jokes revolve around mutual misunderstandings, double-talk, puns and other verbal gags.

	(“Yes, it’s like that, like that, ok”) [while saying OK she makes the Italian gesture for ‘OK’, meaning ‘got it’]	
8	芸人が一、えーと、政治の一、、、あの、政治家のまねをするってことね <i>geinin ga - ēto, seiji no - ... ano, seijika no mane o suru -tte koto ne</i> (“Entertainers... well, they imitate politics... well, politicians, don’t they?”)	
9		、、、えー、 ... ē-- .. (... Uh...)
10	うーん <i>u - n</i> (“Hmm”) [looks as if she understood]	
11		えーと、政治一、政治ひと一の <i>ēto, seiji - seiji hito - no</i> (“Well, politics... political people...”)
12	うんうんうんうん <i>un un un un</i> (“Hmm hmm hmm”)	
13		のように、 <i>come si dice</i> <i>no yōni, come si dice</i> (“Just like” how do you say it?)
14	うん <i>un</i> (“Hmm”)	
15		<i>può darsi... うーん、ぶ、べつに一</i> <i>può darsi... ūn, bu, betsuni --</i> (Maybe... hmm, especially...)
16	政治家の言うことを <i>seijika no iu koto o</i> (“The things that politicians say”)	
17		はい・・・はい <i>hai... hai</i> (“Yes, yes”)
18	うんうんうん <i>un un un</i> (“Hmm hmm hmm”)	
19		そうです <i>sō desu</i> (“I think so”)
20	[nodding]	
21		たとえば一、うん一、、、げ、芸人、、、 <i>politico ように一行く一、ます一、え一</i> <i>tatoeba - un - ... ge, geinin... politico yōni - iku - masu- ē</i> (“For example... hmm entert ... just like a politician ... go...es, hmm...”)

22	[nodding] うんうんうん un un un (Hmm Hmm Hmm)	
23		あー、変な一声を一しま、してるーだろ う、だろ、 <i>ā-- , henna koe o - shima, shiteru - darō, darō,</i> (Ehmm... I suppose, I suppose, they ma... make... a funny voice,...) [tries to explain how Italian comedians make fun of politicians]
24	うんうんうん un un un (“Hmm hmm hmm”)	
25		ま、えー、だ(け)どー、まあ <i>ma, ē - da(ke) do-- , maa</i> (“But, hmm... but... well”)
26	[nodding]	
27		で、こんどーきみにおく <i>de, kondo - kimi ni oku</i> (Next time I will sen- you) [He means that he will send her a video about some Italian entertainer making fun of politicians]
28	あ、ありがとう <i>a, arigatō</i> (“Ah, thank you”)	
29		きみにーきみに送る <i>kimi ni - kimi ni okuru</i> (“I will send you”)
30	ありがとう <i>arigatō</i> (“Thank you”)	
31		えー 本当有名ー、えー、政治、政治のげ んきんはー「ベニーニ」だ。「ベニーニ」 知ってますか？ <i>ē hontō yūmei -ē , seiji, seiji no genkin ha -“Benīni”</i> <i>da. “Benīni” shitte imasuka?</i> (“Eh, he is really popular... eh, politics, cash ⁴ of politics (<i>sigh</i>)... is ‘Benigni.’ Do you know ‘Benigni’?”)
32	ベニーニ？ <i>Benīni?</i> (“Beniini?”)	
33		げんきんだ。ベニーニ、はい、えー <i>genkin da. Benīni, hai, ē</i> (“He is a cash. Benigni, yes, eh”)
34	[shakes her head to say no]	

⁴ IM2 pronounces wrongly the word “entertainer/comedian” (*geinin*) in Japanese, and uses the word for “cash” (*genkin*) instead.

35		はい、いた、イタリアーげんきんだ <i>hai, ita, itaria—genkin da</i> ("Yes, Ital... Italian cash")
36	げんきん? <i>genkin?</i> ("Cash?")	
37		んん、 <i>nn.. "comico"</i> (hmm... "comedian")
38	あー、芸人? <i>ā, geinin?</i> ("Ah, entertainer/comedian?")	
39		芸人、 <i>sì</i> 、このことば、はい、芸人 <i>geinin, sì, kono kotoba, hai, geinin</i> ("Comedian, yes, that word, yes, comedian")
40	はあはあはあはあ <i>ha a ha a ha a ha a</i> (Aah aah aah aah) [nodding]	
41		えー <i>ē</i> (Uh)
42	ベリーニは、あー、ベニーニ? <i>Berīni⁵ ha, ā, Benīni?</i> ("Beriini is, ah, Beniini?") [misunderstands the name of the Italian comedian and then repeats it in the correct way changing (rising) the tone of her voice]	
43		あ、はい <i>a, hai</i> ("Ah, yes")
44	あ、ベニーニは芸人、芸人で <i>a, Benīni ha geinin, geinin de</i> ("Ah, Beniini is a comedian, a comedian")	
45		あー、「ベニーニ」聞こえましたか? うーん <i>ā, "Benīni" kikoemashitaka? Ūn</i> ("Ah! Did you hear "Benigni"? Hmm") [indicates his own ears with fingers, wishing to convey 'have you ever heard this name?']
46	うん、ベニーニ、うん聞こえた <i>un, Benīni, un kikoeta</i> ("Hmm, I heard 'Beniini'") [waves hands]	
47		はい、じゃ、聞こえた、はい <i>hai, ja, kikoeta, hai</i> ("Yes, well, you heard him, yes")

⁵ JF2 pronounces wrongly the name of the Italian comedian ("Beniini", instead of "Benigni" [be'niɲi]).

		[looks happy]
48	うん、ベニーニ <i>un, Benīni</i> (“Hm, Beniini”) [waves hands]	
49		そう、ベニーニは、本当、有名だ <i>Sō, Benīni ha hontō, yūmei da</i> (Well, Benigni must be REALLY popular) [looks extremely happy and excited, believing his partner heard about Benigni before and that the comedian is famous in Japan]
50	ふーん、でも初めて知りました <i>fū--n, demo hajimete shirimashita</i> (Hmm, but it’s the first time I hear (about him)) [due to a slight overlapping with IM1’s sentence, her partner does not hear this utterance]	
51		日本で人が、、、知ったらー、本当有名だ <i>nihonjin ga... shittara--, hontō yūmei</i> (If Japanese know him, he must be REALLY popular) [wants to convey ‘if Japanese know him then he must be really popular there in Japan’]
52	ふん、、、ほー、へー <i>fun hō--, hē-</i> (Hmm... ahh... eeh...) [looking a bit concerned, realizing that probably communication did not get through correctly, as she actually meant, in contrast with what IM1 understood, that is, she did not know the comedian]	

Table 2: IM1 and JF1 in Dyad 1 (second exchange)

In this excerpt, participants are talking about comedians. IM1 tries to explain to his partner that Italian comedians often makes fun of politicians since that is part of mainstream Italian comedy style. IM1 has lots of difficulty in conveying his message due to lack of vocabulary and low language skills, but he gets support by JF1, who also understands his Italian utterance, and shows to be very cooperative through several strategies (rephrasing, asking for confirmation, etc.). In lines 31-51 IT1 misunderstands what JF1 replies when he asks whether she knows a popular Italian comedian called “Benigni,” thinking that she knows him. IT1 displays enthusiasm about that and proceeds with his conviction without noticing that JF1 says “Mh, but it’s the first time I hear about him” (line 50).

When IT1 asks JF1, “Did you hear Benigni?” (line 45: あー、「ベニーニ」聞こえましたか？
ā, “*Benīni*” *kikoemashitaka? ūn*, he intends to ask: “Have you ever heard the name ‘Benigni?’” (「ベニーニ」という名前を聞いたことがありますか? “*Benīni*” *to iu namae o kīta koto ga arimasuka?*) and does not realize his mistake. As a consequence, IT1 gets very excited (lines 49 and 51) by erroneously believing JF1 has previously heard about the comedian. Here, together with grammatical and lexical errors, almost absence of sentence-final particles and a very poor use of *aizuchi* and *ma*, where they would be most required, has led to generate a big misunderstanding. For example, on one hand *aizuchi* would have helped IM1 get his thoughts through in lines 33, 37, 45 and 49. Here (line 49) IM1, consciously or not, uses *aizuchi* (そう *sō*) but his tone and the way he utters do not sound appropriate to the circumstance and fails to be of any help to their communication. As for *ma*, on the other hand, total absence in lines 23 (here there is almost an overlapping of utterance instead), 45, 47, 49 and 51, where a pause would have helped, contributed to generate confusion.

This excerpt represents a case where the NS frequently uses *aizuchi* while the learner ignores them because he (probably) does not recognize most of them. Misunderstanding occurs due to the speaker (IM1) relying only on his peer’s voice tone and gesture, not paying attention to (or recognizing) *aizuchi* and other supporting language features. Furthermore, the learner does not make use of requests for confirmation as a communicative strategy that would help ease speech comprehension.

3.1.3. Excerpt 3 from dyad 2

The following script is the second excerpt from a video conversation between IF2 and JF2 (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Dyad 2 (JF2 and IF2, respectively Y and A)

Line	Student A (IF2)	Student Y (JF2)
1	えーと、ゆかの趣味は？ <i>ēto, Yuka no shumi ha?</i> (“Well, what’s your hobby?”)	

2		私は、なんだろう、ハンドボール、を、 高校生有的时候に、ハンドボールしてたの ね、うん <i>watashi ha, nan darō, handobōru .. o, kōkōsei no toki ni, handobōru shiteta no ne, un</i> (“I, well, I wonder what, handball, I used ... when I was a highschool student, to play handball...”)
3	バレーボールじゃないよ <i>barēbōru janai yo</i> (Not volleyball) [laughing while asking confirmation that her partner is not talking about handball]	
4		ふふふ、バレーボールじゃない <i>fufufu, barēbōru janai</i> (Hmm, not volleyball)
5	えーと、探してきます <i>ēto, sagashitekimasu</i> (Ehmm, I’ll look up) [looks up on her dictionary the word 'handball']	
6		ふふふふ <i>fufufufu</i> (Uh uh uh)
7	[pause]	[pause]
8	あ <i>a</i> (Aah)	
9		あ、フットサルのコートでやるやつ <i>a, futtosaru no kōto de yaru yatsu</i> (Aah, what you do at the futsal court)
10	こんな感じ? <i>konna kanji?</i> (“Something like this?”) [shares a picture through the chat to ask for confirmation]	
11		そんな感じ <i>sonna kanji</i> (“Like that”)
12	わかった <i>wakatta</i> (“Got it”)	
13		それをやって、クラブをやってて、ハンド ボールの試合とか見るの好きだし、結構ス ポーツの試合みるの好きだし、あと、漫画 読むのも好きだし <i>sore o yatte, kurabu o yattete, handobōru no shiai toka miru no suki da shi, kekkō supōtsu no shiai</i>

		<i>miru no suki da shi, ato, manga yomu no mo suki da shi</i> (“I did that, I did club, I like watching handball matches, I quite like watching sport matches, and then I also like reading manga...”)
14	漫画、私も <i>manga, watashi mo</i> (“Manga, me too”) [laughs]	
15	[pause]	[pause]
16		うふふ、、、あと何が好きかなー、食べる ことがすき <i>u fufu... ato nani ga suki kanā, taberu koto ga suki</i> (Hmm uh..., then I wonder what I like, I like eating)
17	[laughs]	
18		あはは <i>a ha ha</i> (Aaa ah ah)
19	[pause]	[pause]
20		今日はスーパーへ行ったとき、たくさんの 甘いものを買いました <i>kyō ha sūpā e itta toki, takusan no amai mono o</i> <i>kaimashita</i> (Today when I went to the supermarket, I bought lots of sweets) [laughs]
21	あはは、、、何買ったんだろう？ <i>a ha ha .. nani katta n darō?</i> (Aah ah, ah.. I wonder that did you buy...?)	
22		たくさんの <i>takusan no</i> (“A lot”) [laughs]
23	[pause]	[pause]
24		えっと <i>etto</i> (“Well”)

Table 3: IF2 and JF2 in dyad 2 (first exchange)

In this short excerpt, the participants are talking about personal interests, trying to get to know each other better before discussing about what makes them laugh and what they consider “funny.”

IF2 asks JF2 what are her hobbies and JF2 gives a few examples. The excerpt shows that, beside the absence of *aizuchi* in both’s utterances, silence between the two partners are frequent, with long pauses (lines 7, 15, 19, 23) which lead the conversation to stagnate. JF2 did not speak much, did not show either involvement or cooperation in communicating with her peer. The Italian student (IF2), who had difficulties in standing moments of silence, tried to keep the conversation ongoing. However, whatever JF2 said, IF2 did not use *aizuchi* thus contributing to end each small conversation. In this situation, since it seems that they did not know how to use *aizuchi* effectively, how to make pauses and how to face

silence during conversation, they both tried to find the next topic and maintain a fun atmosphere by laughing. As for what pertains to *aizuchi* use, it is also worth recalling that, as claimed by Iwasaki (1997), in a conversation between two Japanese NSs it is likely that even as the listener frequently expresses active support for the speakerhood of the turn-holder, the turn-holder also seeks *aizuchi* from the listener in various ways. For example, the turn-holder can add an *aizuchi* at the end of her utterance which elicits an *aizuchi* from the listener (Kita & Ide 2007). The function of *aizuchi* to trigger further *aizuchi* can lead to what Iwasaki (1997) called a “loop sequence” of *aizuchi* when none of the participants develop the content of conversation.

It should also be pointed out that a very limited use of final particles both by the Italian learners (most probably because she could not use them) and by the Japanese NS (maybe because she was not induced to do so by her interlocutor – considering the “loop sequence” function of *aizuchi* that is strictly connected to sentence-final particles) may have contributed to a less smooth dialogue.

This fact may thus be accounted for the lack of *aizuchi* on the NS side, being her interlocutor not sufficiently competent to use *aizuchi*.

4. Results and findings

4.1. Excerpt 1

According to conversation data, the Italian student made a very restricted use of *aizuchi*, which did not help keep the communication smooth and eventually resulted in a tendency to get stuck or to misunderstand (and consequently be misunderstood) during conversation.

In addition, it is relevant to note that, in the current study, in those cases in which Japanese NSs, in their natural conversation, would use various combinations of *aizuchi*, such as “hē” (へー *hē*), “I see” (そうなんだー, ふーん *sō nan da -- hūn*), “great” (すごーい *sugoi*), “I didn't know” (知らなかったー *shiranakatta*), the Italian learner only used a very few variations such as “yes” (はい *hai*), “I see” (うん *un*) and “ok” (大丈夫 *daijōbu*). This caused the misunderstanding to go on as he expressed that he was understanding his peer.

Here, transfer from first language (L1) can also be taken into account for the misuse or lack of use of *aizuchi*. Conversation in Italian language, in fact, does not make such a consistent use of supportive behaviors as it happens in Japanese communication. Despite the exposure to *aizuchi* through formal instruction, the lack of opportunities for Japanese language learners to talk with NSs does not allow them to experience the variety of forms and the multiple functions that *aizuchi* cover.

4.2. Excerpt 2

During a video call, it is difficult to catch the gaze of one's interlocutor, and we can also assume that there are many moments when the listener looks away from the monitor. Therefore, in this excerpt misunderstandings often occurred when one of the participants was reading ~~her~~/his peer's facial expression and heard an utterance only in the moment in which he/~~she~~ looked at the monitor without considering the context and other features. Relying more on facial expressions than utterances, thus not recognizing *aizuchi*, such as in line 46 by JF2: うん、ベニーニ、うん聞こえた *un, Benīni, un kikoeta*, to which IM2 replied (line 47) はい、じゃ、聞こえた、はい *hai, ja, kikoeta, hai*), and in line 50, when JF2 says ふーん、でも初めて知りました *fū--n, demo hajimete shirimashita*, and lack of vocabulary due to low language proficiency, such as in line 45 by IM2: あー、「ベニーニ」聞こえましたか? うーん *ā, "Benīni" kikoemashitaka? Ūn*) can be considered the main reasons for communication failure in this excerpt.

4.3. Excerpt 3

According to previous studies, Italian speakers tend to “speak for the purpose of speaking” and “cannot stand silence” (Kori 2006), this depending also on the speaker's conversation style. This is exemplified in this excerpt. In Italy, it is common see people trying to overcome silence in natural conversation by changing (sometimes even abruptly) topic in order to fill the space. Can this be accounted for the shortage of *aizuchi* used by Italian learners in our study?

Furthermore, the timing and the pause frequently present in Japanese language may indicate a variety of meanings, such as “agreement, “neutrality” or “disagreement,” depending on the length of the pause (Xi 2016). It seems that the misunderstanding caused by inappropriate timing shown in this excerpt is not only related to the timing of the conversation, but also to the length of this interval (pause) that in some cases was long.

It is very important for FL learners participating in virtual exchanges – in which delay in timing is frequent – to be fully aware of the risks of misunderstanding due to inappropriate (length of the) pauses.

5. Conclusions

This study has presented the analysis of three excerpts taken from conversation data by four pairs of Japanese NSs and Italian learners of Japanese language working on the co-production of a video titled “My funny stories,” a project that involved institutions in Japan, France and Italy. The analysis here focuses mainly on the learners' use of *aizuchi* and *ma*.

The three excerpts can be regarded as three representative patterns found in most of the dialogues during the virtual exchanges. It was observed that unnatural responses caused misunderstanding and hindered smoothness throughout the conversations in the whole corpus.

The first excerpt represents the cases in which the learners only use monotone *aizuchi* (for instance only “yes, yes”) thus allowing one’s peers to go on with their talk, regardless of the learners’ understanding. The second excerpt presents the case in which the learners rely more on facial expressions than utterances and almost do not either recognize or use *aizuchi*. The third one represents those cases in which long “pauses” are taken before replying to the interlocutor, conversation gets stuck and misunderstanding occurs. In most of the dialogues of this corpus sentence-final particles are rarely used.

According to previous research (Luo 2016), since the timing of *aizuchi* conveying “incomprehension/not understanding” of Japanese is usually longer than the one expressing “approval” or/and “neutrality”, in video conversations where delay in timing occurs, and in which misunderstanding frequently takes place due to non appropriate “pause,” it is necessary that the speaker is careful not to delay too much the timing of *aizuchi*.

Despite what reported above, as previous research has pointed out, the impact of the use of a technological devices such as a video camera connected to the Internet, which may at times report transmission delays, should be taken into account when conducting this kind of experiments and analysis. The timing when a pause starts to be perceived as troublesome depends on the modes of communication (Kozar 2016), and this is why it is hard to draw general conclusions.

According to the results of the analysis of the whole corpus, even learners who had studied in Japan and therefore had more chances to be exposed to spontaneous conversation with NSs and natural use of *aizuchi*, did not employ much *aizuchi* during conversation causing what could be considered unnatural responses.

To summarize, we have seen a very limited use of *aizuchi*, a strong reliance on the speaker’s gaze instead of utterance especially in those cases where the learner’s Japanese language proficiency was low, and the impact of timing in conversation and of the length of pause.

The current research on remote communication between learners and NSs provides some issues to reflect on for educators who wish to help ease communication and overcome misunderstandings among peers in virtual exchanges. For what concerns Japanese language learning, it should be pointed out that not being aware of the complex relationship between *aizuchi* and silence/pause as two sides of the same coin of Japanese listenership may create intercultural tensions and misunderstandings. Despite learners’ previous short or long stay in Japan, this study has shown that language exposure

does not seem a sufficient condition to be able to use *aizuchi* efficiently. This implies that educators may need to focus more on *aizuchi* (and sentence-final particles as well) use in their teaching. It can be argued that the lack or insufficient time dedicated, in formal instruction, to them, may hinder not just learners' acquisition of these highly complex pragmatic features, but especially learners' awareness in recognizing their existence and importance.

This study also emphasizes what previous research has claimed: the understanding of *aizuchi* in Japanese conversation is not complete without the understanding of final particles, and vice versa.

Regardless of the differences on Japanese language proficiency and in terms of previous experience in Japan, the study shows a generalized tendency, emerged in this corpus, in both lack of use of *aizuchi* and difficulty in handling silence/pauses: at what extent may this be accounted for by socio-cultural factors and consequently by the influence of the speaker's L1? This is an issue that need to be further considered in future research on this topic.

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