



## How Advanced-level Japanese EFL Learners Manage Disagreements in Group Discussions

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During spoken discourse, disagreements and agreements take on discrete turn structures based on preference. A common assumption is that agreement is sought after, while disagreement is to be avoided. This stems from the fact that disagreements are a sign of conflict and, therefore, are deemed to be face-threatening. This study employs conversation analysis to examine how disagreement unfolds during small group discussions among advanced-level language learners at an English-medium university in Japan. It was found that at the turn-level, interactants drew on an abundance of mitigation tactics and positioned them strategically within their turns. An examination of extended sequences of turns revealed that learners could successfully engage in oppositional talk to satisfy both the transactional and interpersonal goals of the task. A pattern emerged in which discussions led off with uncertainty, but through the careful management of disagreement, participants were able to co-construct knowledge. The group interaction presented in this paper evidences the ways in which sociopragmatic competence can influence the quality of cooperative, task-based language learning.

**Keywords:** disagreement, conversation analysis, task-based learning, group discussion, advanced-level language learners

### Introduction

Disagreement is often depicted as controversial and face-threatening. According to Pomerantz's (1984) evaluation, "conversants orient to their disagreeing with one another as uncomfortable, unpleasant, risking threat, insult, or offense" (p. 77). Leech's (1983) "maxim of agreement" states that interactants seek to minimize disagreement between self and others and maximize agreement. Despite this inclination to identify disagreement in negative terms, research also suggests that disagreement can signal intimacy and sociability and be a healthy component of relationships (Locher, 2004). Sifianou (2012) argues that "disagreement may indicate the addressee's interest through his/her involvement in interaction rather than indifference through a straightforward agreement or even silence" (p. 1560). Nonetheless, disagreement is complex and multilayered, as is reflected in the multitude of research angles it has been examined from, including how it is realized in casual conversation (Konakahara, 2016), in academic settings (Rees-Miller, 2000), and in intercultural communication (Toomaneejinda & Harding, 2018), and how contextual variables, such as topic of conversation (LoCastro, 1986) and status of interlocutor (Walkinshaw, 2007) shape its linguistic construction.

A majority of the previous studies on disagreement analyze how it arises in talk between native speakers. The studies that approach disagreement from a second or foreign language learning perspective tend to explore its appropriateness through the inclusion and exclusion of hedging, questioning, and other indirect strategies. The present study aims to analyze disagreement during EFL group discussions as a



speech event and not just as the narrower speech act (see Hymes, 1971). Going beyond an analysis of disagreement utterances themselves and examining disagreements from a wider perspective will provide a more in-depth understanding of how potential conflicts emerge and are managed by students, and what effects (if any) these occurrences have on learning outcomes. To meet this end, conversation analysis (CA) was employed to examine the turn-by-turn interaction of advanced-level EFL learners at a Japanese university in an effort to explore how and why disagreements occur in a group-work context. The data presented in this study is used to discuss pedagogical implications of disagreement on the instruction of pragmatics and the goals of learner-learner group discussions.

## Literature Review

### A Theoretical Framework for Disagreement

In his seminal work on social interaction, Goffman (1967) defines *face* as, “the positive social value a person claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken in a particular contact” (p. 5). He establishes that in any interaction, face requires mutual concern and maintenance by all involved participants. Alignment between individuals can be strengthened or weakened by the ways they attempt (or do not attempt) to preserve their own face and the face of others. When interactants begin to fall out of alignment, Goffman (1967) notes that “face-work serves to counteract ‘incidents’—that is, events whose effective symbolic representations threaten face” (p. 12). Brown and Levinson (1978) categorize face and face-threatening acts into two distinct categories: negative face and positive face. Threats to negative face are an attempt to impede one’s freedom, and threats to positive face impose upon one’s desire to be approved of or have one’s goals be considered as worthy. Although interactants strive to maintain one another’s and their own face, Brown and Levinson further posit that rational agents desire to express themselves in a clear, efficient, and sometimes urgent manner. Thus, participants of an interaction are constantly weighing the possible trade-offs between conveying intent and maintaining face.

Face has been a foundational concept underlying any theoretical claims on how disagreements are carried out during talk-in-interaction. In a preeminent study, Pomerantz (1984) identifies a preference structure that dictates the turn shape in which an act of agreement or disagreement is produced. Agreements are seen as the preferred assessment of another’s utterance, as is exemplified in (1) below.

- (1) A: She was a nice lady—I liked her.  
 B: I liked her too.  
 (Pomerantz, 1984)

As is demonstrated here, agreements are direct and come with a minimal gap between an utterance and its subsequent turn. However, when an utterance’s adjacency pair is a disagreement, the turn structure is dissimilar, as shown in (2) below.

- (2) A: Butchu admit he is having fun and you think it’s funny.  
 B: I think it’s funny, yeah. But it’s a ridiculous funny.  
 (Pomerantz, 1984)

This exemplifies a dispreferred turn shape, as the disagreement itself, “But it’s a ridiculous funny” is delayed and prefaced by a partial agreement, “I think it’s funny, yeah.” This turn structure reflects a strong tendency for interactants to avoid disagreement by seeking out some form of agreement (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Leech, 1983; Lerner, 1996). When these initial agreement components (e.g., token agreements, pseudo-agreements, and qualified agreements) preface a disagreement, a weak disagreement is formed (Pomerantz, 1984). Alternative to an initial agreement component, various delay devices may

be used (e.g., silence, hesitation, and clarification requests) within a single turn or across a series of turns. Weak disagreements are also commonly supplemented with accounts, explanations, or exemplifications. Disagreements that do not contain any agreement component or delay tactics are unmitigated face threats and thus deemed to be strong disagreements (Pomerantz, 1984). To reiterate, the guiding principle behind the preference structure of agreements and disagreements is that interactants seek to maximize cooperation and affiliation and minimize conflict in conversational activities.

Moving beyond the form of the disagreement speech act itself, research has theorized how disagreement plays out over extended segments of talk, which are referred to as “conflict episodes” (Gruber, 1998), “aggravated disagreement” (Rees-Miller, 2000), and “foregrounded disagreement” (Scott, 2002). A number of scholars (see Gruber, 1998; Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998) have stated that these conflict episodes start with a three-step introductory phase, entailing an initial claim, which is followed by a disagreement and then a counterstatement to the disagreement. (3) below exemplifies this three-turn sequence.

(3) D: I’m not blowing it out of proportion.

C: Yes you are::.

D: Tell me how.

(Muntigl & Turnbull, 1997)

In this example, D puts forward an initial claim, which is refuted by C. Then, D challenges C’s refute. Without this third-turn counterstatement, a disagreement will not develop into a conflict. In order to avoid escalation, interactants may also back down from their stance (Antaki, 1994; Coulter, 1990). If a conflict episode does surface, Gruber (1998) notes that disagreements no longer show the features of dispreferred second assessments and turn changes do not occur at normal transition-relevance places (i.e., there is more interruption). During such bouts of disagreement, one is challenged to speak forcefully in order to maintain his or her beliefs and identity (Rees-Miller, 2000). This corroborates Kotthoff’s (1993) position that once a conflict has been established, individuals become less likely to attend to the face of others because of an urgent need to enhance their own face. This leads to a circumstance in which opponents are expected to defend their stance, and conceding too quickly can be a show of weakness. Moreover, as Sifianou (2012) argues, “disagreements are not simply accepted or rejected but tend to initiate longer sequences” (p. 1557). These explications demonstrate that the consequences of a disagreement unfold over a series of turns, involving a prolonged and complex interplay between face and politeness strategies. Ultimately, understanding these occurrences requires scrutiny at both the turn level and as an entity of larger interaction.

## **Disagreement in Language-learning Contexts**

In a longitudinal study of ESL learners at an American university, Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury (2004) report a sequential pattern that learners progressed through as they acquired more complex forms of disagreement strategies. Many learners started with direct, unmitigated disagreements, but gradually began including an agreement component prior to their disagreements. This was followed by postponing disagreements deeper into a turn and, finally, using multiple turns to state a disagreement. This sequence of acquisition is further supported by Lawson (2009) who found that ESL university students heavily relied on hedging, apologizing, and expressions of regret when disagreeing, but rarely used token agreements, partial agreements, and other forms of more linguistically demanding indirect strategies used by native speakers. In another study of university ESL learners’ disagreement strategies, Kreutel (2007) observed a few “desirable features,” such as the use of hedging and explanations, but also some “undesirable features,” such as unmitigated disagreement and message abandonment. Both Lawson and Kreutel’s studies shed light on the structure of disagreement speech acts of learners; however, their data collection methods (discourse-completion tasks and interviews) leave uncertainty as to how learners may

modify their practices in natural, multi-party settings in which disagreement occurs within a given task and over the course of extended interaction.

In one study that examines disagreement practices within extended segments of naturally-occurring talk, Toomaneejinda and Harding (2018) found two salient strategies. During academic group discussions, English as a lingua franca (ELF) participants attempted to cast doubt on one another's positions by shifting focus to a separate issue and thereby avoiding direct conflict. This finding supports Gruber's (1998) notion of "pragmatic disagreements," which he describes as a common way to subtly signal disagreement by shifting topics. Another strategy used by the ELF learners in Toomaneejinda and Harding's data was forming an alliance with certain group members. This allowed participants to show agreement with a previous statement of disagreement without feeling compelled to disagree directly themselves. The authors conclude that interactants used complex disagreement strategies to meet the goals of the assigned task by challenging the ideas of others while also maintaining good working relationships.

Dippold's (2011) examination of argumentative discourse among L2 German learners revealed that while low-level learners used agreement elements primarily to mitigate disagreement, advanced-level learners used disagreements more strategically—namely, to undermine another's argument. Dippold speculates that the reason for this is because low-level learners require more cognitive effort to retrieve linguistic resources and, therefore, have less time to focus on increasing cohesion between turns and constructing turns that build on or challenge previous turns. Consequently, the author argues that as declarative knowledge develops, learners will be able to focus more energy on refining their argumentative skills.

Other studies have analyzed disagreements as they pertain specifically to Japanese learners. Beebe and Takahashi (1989) found that Japanese students often used a questioning strategy to express disagreement in private meetings with a professor. This strategy led to misunderstandings, embarrassment on the part of both parties, and failure to achieve intentions. In another study on disagreement strategies in intercultural communication, Kobayashi & Viswat (2010) report that Japanese university students' silence and use of ambiguous statements when voicing disagreement were often misinterpreted or negatively judged by their American counterparts. As it relates to novice-level Japanese learners, Fujimoto (2012) found a strong preference for agreement in her study of group discussions. While disagreements did appear, students frequently chose not to address these disagreements because they did not understand how to manage the next steps of an unfolding conflict episode. Fujimoto's findings suggest that, along with struggling to construct appropriate indirect disagreement at the turn level, novice learners are also likely to lack the necessary interactional skills to manage disagreements over the course of an interaction through maintaining one another's face.

The research presented in this section underlines the importance of examining instances of disagreement from three angles: content, form, and the role it plays in interpersonal interaction (Angouri & Locher, 2012). Such analysis can bring to light not just the sociopragmatic competence of learners in analyzing context and applying appropriate linguistic resources, but also, it can reveal the ways in which disagreement impacts goal-oriented interpersonal discourse in language learning.

## Method

### Context and Participants

The present study was conducted at an English-medium university in Japan. The undergraduate writing class from which data was collected was part of the university's English for Academic Purposes Program. This class was designed to meet the standards for the "English for Liberal Arts" model, which emphasizes critical thinking through exploring complex real-world issues and finding solutions to them (Hale & Wadden, 2012). In previous units of this class, students engaged in such topics as bioethics, intercultural

communication and perception, and gender. The lesson in which this study was conducted was part of a larger unit on racial issues in Japan. Prior to the present lesson, students were responsible for reading an article on anti-racism protests in Japan, which raised issues regarding cultural appropriation, institutional racism, and nationalism.

The class met twice weekly for 75-minute lessons. This lesson took part in the ninth week of the semester and was held online through Zoom. The lessons themselves were conducted seminar-style, providing students with frequent opportunities to engage in open-ended discussions in small groups of three or four members.

All students were either first- or second-year undergraduate students and were all considered advanced-level EFL learners. These students either successfully completed one year of English-medium instruction in the university's EAP program or tested high enough to bypass the EAP courses entirely. All students in this class were preparing for a minimum one-year study abroad program, which was a requirement for graduation.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Audio and video data were collected in one 75-minute lesson. During the lesson, students were divided into four separate Zoom Breakout Rooms, of which two rooms had four members and the other two rooms had three members. All groups were randomly selected, and each group retained the same members for each of the three discussion sessions. Students were assigned a topic to discuss prior to being sent off to their respective Breakout Rooms. The topics were open-ended and designed to get students to share their opinions by applying their knowledge of the class content to TV commercials, music videos, and other forms of outside media.

Students were asked to record their group discussions and upload their videos to a shared class folder. From one 75-minute lesson, a total of 72 minutes of group-discussion data were transcribed by the author. There were three discussions for each of the four groups, with each discussion being approximately seven minutes in length. Of the twelve group discussions, ten were transcribed for this study (two of the discussions did not contain any data that was deemed relevant to the study and, therefore, were not transcribed). Prior to the data collection, the researcher explained the scope of the study and rationale for the collection of the discourse data. Participants in the study were asked to give consent and were provided with an option not to participate. All 14 students consented to participate. Video data of the interactions were stored on a password protected computer. They were then transcribed, and the participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The video and anonymized transcription were shared and evaluated by an authorized co-researcher in the study to confirm that the transcriptions were accurate. Upon confirming the accuracy of the transcriptions, the original video files were permanently deleted from the researcher's computer.

Conversation analysis (CA) was the chosen transcription method because it captures the nuances of turn-by-turn interaction, including intonation, pitch raises, pauses, vowel lengthening, and other features of naturally-occurring talk that may be lost through other transcription methods (see Appendix A for transcription symbols). Because CA methodology prescribes "unmotivated looking," which entails examining data without holding any predetermined hypotheses or theoretical assumptions (Wong & Waring, 2010), this study was guided by a simple and straightforward question: How do disagreements play out in advanced-level EFL group discussions?

## Results

### Group Discussion 1

This first discussion comes from a group of three students. Prior to being sent off to Breakout Rooms, students watched a video of a Japanese comedian wearing black face paint doing an impersonation of Louis Armstrong. Groups were to discuss whether the video exemplified cultural appropriation. The discussion begins with one student, Niko (female), expressing some uncertainty as to whether the comedian's performance can be interpreted as racist. She characterizes the video as a comedic act of *monomane* (impersonation) and alludes to the common assumption that the purpose of such acts is to mimic the target as accurately as possible. However, she also acknowledges that this comedic act may be inappropriate in some sense. Next, another student, Chizu (female), echoes Niko's sentiments by stating the comedian's performance is simply an accepted form of entertainment, but at the same time, she supposes that such entertainment may be offensive to Americans (see Appendix B for full transcription). This sequence sets the stage for Aya's (female) disagreement as shown in Excerpt 1 below.

#### EXCERPT 1

##### *A Disagreement: Narrow Point of View*

Line	Speaker	Talk
18	Aya	hh eh I- actually I don't think <<this is racism>> uh
19		↑sorry this is only the Japanese point of view. They just
20		enjoying <i>monomane</i> hh or, how- uhh I think this is just
21		famous- >>the Japanese people<< do <i>monomane</i> for
22		[Japanese people] so:: if the Japanese people do the
23	Niko	[yeah]
24	Aya	<i>monomane</i> for Japanese people there's no problem, ev-
25		even though they don't understand the person- person but
26		n:: I- (2.0) \$in my opinion\$ it's same as this- as these
27		[monomane] so:: but maybe my perspective-
28	Niko	[yeah]
29	Aya	<i>nandaro</i> (How can I explain this.) uh- point- <i>nandaro</i> narrow
30		point of view (2.0) don't- don't many people don't think
32		same as me °so°=

In line 18, Aya interjects with a laugh (hh) and some hesitation “eh I-,” seemingly to redress her imminent attempt to break alignment with Niko and Chizu. She continues by issuing her disagreement, “I don't think <<this is racism>>”. Her apology at line 19 seems to serve two purposes. First, it is a way for her to seek acceptance of her opinion even though it is in opposition to the ideas previously presented. Second, it creates distance between herself and the idea that the video is not racist. By stating that “this is only the Japanese point of view,” she attempts to sidestep any potential responsibility for her counterstatement and, thereby, preserve her own face. In lines 19-27, Aya proceeds towards an explanation for her disagreement by arguing that as long as the comedic act is performed by a Japanese for a Japanese audience, it should be acceptable. Towards the end of her turn (lines 27-30), Aya backpedals slightly and hedges her disagreement by offering that her opinion may come from a “narrow point of view” and that “many people don't think same as me.” Because a self-degrading evaluation of one's own competence can be a signal of concession (Kotthoff, 1993), despite clearly declaring her disagreement, this hedge by Aya figures to be an attempt to realign with the rest of the group. Overall, this turn by Aya has accomplished two aims. First, she has clearly stated her opposing point of view that the video does not depict racism. Second, she has hedged her disagreement in a manner that allows for a rebuttal without the risk of spiraling into a conflict episode.

Although it has been reported that lower-level learners tend to back down, concede, or avoid addressing a disagreement at this juncture in a potential conflict episode (Fujimoto, 2012; Sharma, 2012), Excerpt 2 below, which directly follows Excerpt 1, demonstrates how Niko maintains her oppositional stance towards Aya while simultaneously performing facework to preserve the group's alignment.

## EXCERPT 2

*A Counterstatement: There's Some Racism*

Line	Speaker	Talk
33	Niko	=No no I don't know maybe like- I think maybe most of
34		the people think that they're just enjoying that as an
35		entertainment but >>sometimes I feel that<< those
36		<i>monomane</i> like Japanese person mimicking other Japanese
37		comedian maybe celebrities, I sometimes feel that ↑oh
38		they're just making fun of it like you know I know they're
39		not maybe but it seems like they're <u>overreaction</u> like
40		[overacting]
41	Aya	[uhh]
42	Niko	over- you know ↑sometimes I feel like if I were the one who
43		were mimicked by others, and like just showed the other
44		person- other people <<I feel kind of>> bad (1.0) [maybe]
45	Aya	[mmm]
46	Niko	they're laughing at what I am behaving in front of people
47		ri:ght [so sometimes] <i>monomane</i> in particular I don't (1.0)
48	Aya	[mm mm]
49	Niko	of course I like it- I love it- I enjoy it but sometimes I feel
50		like although it- although they didn't include other
51		countries' people like only with Japanese people I think
52		there's some racism or some kind of you know, mocking
53		yeah=
54	Aya	=mmm

In response to Aya's self-evaluated "narrow point of view," Niko's prompt "No no" (line 31) shows disagreement with Aya. While at first glance, this strong refute appears to contradict the preference structure for disagreements, Pomerantz (1984) explains that disagreements become the preferred next action following a prior speaker's self-deprecating remarks. Therefore, Niko's direct and unmitigated disagreement seems to be a move towards realignment with Aya. Niko continues her efforts in reestablishing accord with Aya through a lengthy disagreement preface (lines 33-38), in which she makes a qualified agreement stating, "I think maybe most of the people think they're just enjoying that as an entertainment but." Niko's disagreement finally arrives in lines 39-40 when she argues, "they're overreaction like overacting." Because Niko's turn is now a counterstatement to Aya's disagreement, her elaborated disagreement preface appears to be in an effort to disguise her disagreement and avoid escalation into a conflict episode. Niko carries on supporting her stance (lines 42-47), and Aya seems to back down with backchannels at lines 45 and 48. Despite Aya not showing any indication of seeking to assert another counterstatement, Niko continues her attempts to maintain alignment with Aya in lines 49-51 with, first, her admission that she enjoys *monomane* performances, "I like it- I love it- I enjoy it," and then another qualified agreement, "although they didn't include other countries' people." Niko punctuates her repeated attempts to preserve alignment with Aya by driving home her main point, which is "I think there's some kind of racism or some kind of you know, mocking." Niko's long-winded turn concludes with a final back channel from Aya at line 54.

Excerpt 2 is particularly salient in that it captures an exchange between the second and third stages of a potential conflict episode. Although Aya's initial disagreement in Excerpt 1 carries the risk of face loss, Niko's counterstatement in Excerpt 2, being the third turn in the dispute, comes with considerably more risk. Her rebuttal requires even more facework to keep alignment with Aya, which she deftly carries out.

To do this, she couches her disagreement stance within various acknowledgements of Aya's argument, along with qualified agreements and hedges. This endeavor requires twenty lines of talk, but ultimately, Niko is able to accomplish her goal of defending her position without the risk of further aggravating the disagreement.

This first group discussion concludes with Excerpt 3. Here, Niko seems to put forward a summary that patches together the pertinent points made by all parties.

#### EXCERPT 3

##### *A Summary: It's Based on Perception*

Line	Speaker	Talk
55	Niko	<<that's what I thought>> ↑but I love it so yeah, it's really
56		based on how people perceive it (10.0) and sometimes it
57		can be said as <i>parodi-</i> (parody) parody; parody can be similar
58		to <i>monomane</i> but it's similar to this problem where many
59		you know like films just put the parody of other celebrities
60		or other countries' cultural behavior and make like some
61		enjoyable scenes right those parody can sometimes be
62		black I mean they can sometimes be recognized as racism
63		so I think it is very difficult °yeah°

Niko begins with an all-embracing remark, "it's really based on how people perceive it," and acknowledges that parody and *monomane* include "some enjoyable scenes," before she reiterates that these comedic acts can sometimes be "black." She wraps up her summary and the group discussion by commenting on how difficult it is to interpret the contents of the comedian's performance. This summary is noteworthy because it appears to be an act of reconciliation, as it brings together the two oppositional viewpoints of the discussion instead of drawing attention to one superior perspective.

## Group Discussion 2

This second discussion comes from a separate group of three students. Like Group Discussion 1, this group was responsible for analyzing the same video of the Japanese comedian's black-face impersonation of Louis Armstrong. Similar to the previous group discussion, this group also begins with some uncertainty. One student, Saki (female), states that the video is simply entertainment and does not contain any harmful content. Another student, Sota (male), raises a provocative question, which the rest of the discussion builds off: Does the entertainer have to paint his face black? Sota answers his own question by asserting that the entertainer relies on his voice to impersonate, leaving his black face as an unnecessary part of his performance (see Appendix C for full transcription). This comment draws a disagreement from the third student, Ken (male), as is shown below in Excerpt 4.

#### EXCERPT 4

##### *A Disagreement: What is the Goal of Monomane?*

Line	Speaker	Talk
33	Ken	Yeah I thi- I don't (1.0) hmm I don't completely agree
34		to your argument. I think his goal is to become <<as
35		close to real>> as possible.
36	Sota	What for? Is it to <u>entertain</u> people?
37	Ken	↑Well I think that's the point of <i>monomane</i> . =
38	Sota	=mm=

Besides some hesitation to initiate the turn and the use of a hedge, "don't completely agree," Ken's disagreement in lines 33-35 is rather pointed. This face threat with no substantial explanation prompts Sota into a clarification request at line 36, "What for? Is it to entertain people?" In delineating the various



types of third-turn counterstatements, Muntingl and Turnbull (1998) note that these requests for clarification are classified as “challenges” (p. 229). Such interrogatives often begin with a question particle and thus appear to act as questions, but their main implication is that the prior speaker cannot provide sufficient evidence for the claim in dispute. Therefore, what on the surface seems to be a clarification request is, in fact, a face-threatening counterstatement. In order to firmly defend his point, Ken jump starts his next turn (line 37) with a pitch raise and goes on to argue that the point of the comedian’s impersonation is to entertain the audience and not to insinuate any racism. Instead of issuing a further counterstatement, which could have easily led to a conflict episode, Sota backs down at line 38 with a backchannel. While it may appear that Sota concedes to Ken’s argument, as we will see shortly, this concession is only temporary, as Sota looks for an opportunity to reassert his original stance that the video depicts racism.

Following this initial dispute, Ken continues to defend his stance by providing examples of impersonators that mimic their target with attention to minute detail. He cites comedians who paint wrinkles on their faces to imitate the elderly and American performers who change the color of their skin to imitate Asians. These exemplifications demonstrate that Ken is unwavering in his position; however, as is shown below in Excerpt 5, Ken hedges his disagreement, which opens the door for Sota’s rebuttal.

## EXCERPT 5

*A Counterstatement: We Should Avoid Monomane*

Line	Speaker	Talk
51	Ken	=And I think that’s the same for- like I didn’t- I didn’t
52		think that his painting was exaggerating or anything.
53		So from that point I didn’t really [feel-] ↑ <u>but</u> as I said if uh
54	Sota	[mmm]
55	Ken	people with dark skin color actually felt like racist then
56		it would be racist.
57	Sota	Yeah it really depends on how target actually thinks right.
58		What they actually think. Yeah it’s up on them. But yeah
59		we should try to avoid it as much as possible but it’s
60		actually difficult for us to metacog- cognition. [Yeah so]
61	Ken	[mhm]

In lines 51-53, Ken restates his opinion that the video does not exemplify cultural appropriation but qualifies this point in remarking that “if people with dark skin color actually felt like racist then it would be racist.” By wrapping up his turn in such a manner, it appears that Ken seeks to realign with Sota by preserving his face. Sota also immediately signals his intent to realign (lines 57-58) by supporting Ken’s point that the issue of cultural appropriation is dependent upon how black people view the video. However, in the same turn (line 59), Sota reasserts his initial opinion that the video is racist in stating, “we should try to avoid it as much as possible.” Sota’s turn ends with another hedge, saying it’s difficult to fully comprehend how other groups of people will interpret the video. Like Ken, it is noteworthy that Sota, on multiple occasions, maneuvers to pursue realignment while also holding on to his original stance. Resembling the summary Niko provided at the end of Group Discussion 1, Sota brings this group discussion to an end with a culminating statement of his own, as is shown below.

## EXCERPT 6

*A Summary: Racism is Difficult to Understand*

Line	Speaker	Talk
62	Sota	So:: like what Ken said before it's difficult for us to
63		understand the whole culture in the world so just- yeah it's
64		necessary for us to understand the best as we can like
65		what's in front of us. In that way Black Lives Matter was
66		much more relative to us. It was like big news, everyone
67		had chance to be exposed to that news but yeah just like
68		in the article Rich and Hida some people didn't find it
69		relative to us which kinda makes me sad. (3.0)

Excerpt 6 begins with Sota's recognition of his main adversary, Ken, by stating that it is difficult to understand the complexity of world cultures and thus determine what constitutes racism (lines 62-65). However, he also alludes to his own main argument that examples of racism are prevalent but may not be acknowledged by the public (lines 66-69). Like Niko, it appears that Sota is trying to accomplish two things with this final turn. First, he is trying to quell any possible feelings of conflict that the group endured by calling attention to both of the oppositional points of view. And second, he hopes to provide an overall takeaway from the group's discussion in order to satisfy the requirements of the discussion task.

## Discussion

This analysis has examined disagreement from two separate but connected angles: at the micro-level (i.e., the production of the speech acts themselves) and at a macro-level to identify how disagreements are managed over the course of longer sequences of talk. In this section, both of these viewpoints will be addressed, along with how the results of this study can inform second and foreign language pedagogy.

Japanese learners' acts of disagreement have been traditionally characterized as "minimalist" and "blunt" (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). The present study, however, substantiates more recent findings that learners are able to produce disagreement in a more indirect manner (Fujimoto, 2012; Kreutal, 2007; Lawson, 2009). Learners were able to draw on a wide range of tactics to express and soften disagreement, including apologizing, asking for clarification, hedging, hesitating, providing explanations and exemplifications, and using agreement prefaces. The most ubiquitous of these strategies seemed to be the use of hedges. Ken's "if people with dark skin color actually felt like racist then it would be racist" and Aya's admittedly "narrow point of view" are two examples of hedges that allowed possible reconciliation to be a much less demanding pursuit. Also noteworthy was the location in each turn that these acts of redress tended to appear. As expected, they arose near the beginnings of disagreement turns, but they were also heavily used at the very ends of these same turns. In Excerpt 1, Aya begins her turn by apologizing for her opposing viewpoint, and then concludes her statement of disagreement by remarking that her perspective may not be shared by the majority. Similarly, Ken, in Excerpt 4, begins by stating that he doesn't "completely agree" with Sota in that the video is racist before wrapping up his disagreement by supposing that the video may be deemed racist depending on the audience. Both examples suggest a propensity to bookend an adversarial comment with attempts at maintaining alignment.

By concluding disagreement turns with these hedges, the interactants provided a window of opportunity for their peers to issue a counterstatement without the risk of entering a conflict episode. This was evident by the fact that in both discussions, opposing parties were able to elaborate on their points of view, absent of any sign of aggravated conflict (i.e., interruptions at untimely transition-relevance places and preference for strong disagreements). Although it has been demonstrated that conceding is a common way for second language users to exit disagreements (Fujimoto, 20012; Sharma, 2012), the students in these discussions exhibited an ability to hear out each other's argument without a clear sign of concession.

This was further apparent by analyzing the summary-like statements provided by Sota and Niko at the end of each discussion. Both tried to integrate the combatant viewpoints in order to conclude the discussion with some sort of consensus. This finding speaks to the tendency of Japanese groups to avoid loss of face and maintain harmony (Watanabe, 2005). In analyzing the cultural significance of Japanese learners' group discussions, Watanabe reports that groups sought after non-confrontational communication where harmony, consensus, and avoidance of face loss were heavily valued. She describes the conclusion of these group discussions as containing a formalized, punctuated end through which the group could view themselves as a collective rather than co-present individuals. Contemplating the insights gleaned from Watanabe's findings, Niko and Sota's summaries are telling because they highlight the knowledge that the group co-constructed, as opposed to singling out any one victorious perspective.

In illustrating how disagreement allows for both cooperation and perspective building, Georgakopoulou (2001) posits, "the outcome is not the prevalence of a single interlocutor's view but a shared perspective jointly shaped and fine-tuned" (p. 1898). This sentiment has been reciprocated in studies of second and foreign language learners in that members of a group typically seek to meet both the transactional and interactional goals at hand (Bejarano, 2001; Toomanejinda & Harding, 2018). In the present study, attempts to satisfy these dual purposes of group work were salient. At the start of each discussion, there was obvious uncertainty as to how to interpret the black-face comedian's performance. However, disagreements facilitated a constructive discussion that forced students to elaborate on their own perspectives and consider the shortcomings of one another's arguments. This enabled each group to arrive at a co-constructed understanding of racism and cultural appropriation. At the same time, both groups were able to manage their disagreements in such a way that they could voice their differing opinions while protecting a sense of goodwill. It was clear that at times the group's task goals came into conflict with their interpersonal goals; however, through their use of appropriate mitigation strategies, they were able to successfully achieve both of these desired outcomes.

Based on previous research on the disagreement strategies of language learners coupled with the findings in the present study, the ability and willingness to maneuver around potential conflict are crucial factors that distinguish the disagreement talk of advanced-level learners from that of lower-level learners. Although self-expression is a pillar of the communicative language classroom, the challenge for those lacking sufficient knowledge and experience is to do so in a manner that saves face when confrontation arises. This paper demonstrates how sociopragmatic competence can influence the quality of group discussion. Furthermore, the findings presented here signal a need to assist learners in developing the competence to engage in these types of discussions. Language pedagogy that includes an explicit focus on disagreement strategies, such as prefacing disagreements, using hedges, and offering consensus-building counterstatements can provide learners with essential tools for critical thinking, problem solving, cooperative learning, and other features of task-based language learning.

To achieve effective instruction of disagreement strategies, a couple notable hurdles need to be accounted for. The first is the possibility that cross-cultural differences may cause misconceptions as they pertain to the use of politeness strategies in English. In referencing Japanese learners, Beebe and Takahashi (1989) claim that many have a polarizing view of politeness in English and Japanese. Students are apt to believe that English is an explicit and direct language, and that Japanese, in contrast, places a greater emphasis on politeness and confrontation avoidance. The authors argue that such presumptions can be a source of various degrees of pragmatic failure from simple misunderstandings to causing offense. On this basis, a critical first step stands to be one that raises awareness of the inextricable connection between politeness, face, and disagreement in English. A second challenge is that textbooks often fail to include adequate explanation of the form-use relationship of frequently occurring speech acts (Ren & Han, 2016; Song, 2020; Vallenga, 2004). Learners must understand how to modify their disagreement strategies in relation to various contextual variables, such as status and social distance of interlocutor and topic of discussion. Looking at disagreements at a macro-level, learners must also be aware of how the contextual variables that arise as confrontational talk evolves is likely to have a bearing on the mitigation

strategies they choose. Because of the complexity of factors at play, rather than teaching learners the rights and wrongs for performing pragmatics, researchers have advocated for instruction that enables learners to develop an analytical lens in which to interpret instances of intercultural communication and make informed choices about appropriate language use (Chick, 1996; Cohen & Sykes, 2013).

While this study attempts to shed light on the disagreement practices of advanced-level EFL learners, it does not address how contextual variables, such as gender, status and social distance of interlocutor, and topic of discussion influence the discourse of group work. Although research has provided insight into how these variables affect the disagreement strategies of learners (Liang & Han, 2005; LoCastro, 1986; Walkinshaw, 2007), what remains underexplored is how these variables come into play when learners are to communicate within the parameters of a given task. Such research would further our understanding of the ways in which group work can be modified to suit the needs of learners. In addition, this study does not attempt to assess how the online nature of interaction affects turn-taking, pauses, silence, overlapping speech, and other aspects of interaction central to CA. While recent research has reported on the ways in which video-mediated communication and face-to-face interaction differ with respect to CA (Due & Licoppe, 2021; Jenks, 2014; Tudini & Liddicoat, 2016), it is beyond the scope of this paper to address these issues. However, such analyses may certainly augment and clarify the findings presented here. One final avenue of future research is assessing how the disagreement talk displayed by learners in this study might take shape in an intercultural context, where disagreement may be expected rather than be seen as something to avoid. Because the students in this study used disagreement strategies primarily as a means of mitigation, it is uncertain how they might alter their conversational style when strategically defending one's stance and finding holes in another's argument is of greater conversational importance. What adjustments (if any) will these learners need to make in order to successfully disagree in an international learning environment? How will their (in)ability to adjust impact their learning and sense of identity? These are questions that warrant further examination.

## Conclusion

Despite the inherent interrelation between face and indirect speech in acts of disagreement, the findings presented here aim to contribute to the growing body of literature suggesting that disagreement can be a healthy component of interaction. Taken from a second or foreign language pedagogical point of view, disagreements can facilitate lively discussion in which interactants evaluate one another's perspectives and construct shared knowledge. While the results of this study indicate as much, the need for appropriate sociopragmatic knowledge is a critical prerequisite. Repeatedly pursuing agreement and abandoning attempts at disagreement in the face of opposition may lead to efficient classroom-based task completion but leave learners with a skewed perception of how interaction really happens. Consequently, teaching learners to make use of disagreement strategies is a vital steppingstone towards empowering them to freely express and critique contrary points of view.

With a greater emphasis placed on content-based instruction, it has become increasingly more important for students to use language to grapple with real-world issues. In such curricula, it is common for learners to engage in cooperative tasks in which they must discuss, debate, and work towards solving these issues. As lower-level learners develop proficiency and transition into more content-oriented instruction, it is critical to help them develop the interactional repertoire to succeed in collaborative environments. As such, this study not only hopes to provide an awareness of what advanced-level learners are capable of when facing emerging conflict talk, but it can also serve as a model for educators of novice learners who strive to ensure that disagreements are seen as a constructive process in cooperative tasks.

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## Appendix A

### CA transcription symbols

.	(period) Falling intonation
?	(question mark) Rising intonation
,	(comma) Continuing intonation
-	(hyphen) Marks an abrupt cut-off
::	(colon(s)) Prolonging of sound
w <u>o</u> :rd	(colon after underlined letter) Falling intonation on word
w <u>o</u> :rd	(underlined colon) Rising intonation on word
<u>word</u>	(underlining) Stress on word
WORD	(all caps) Loud speech
°word°	(degree symbols) Quiet speech
↑word	(upward arrow) Raised pitch
↓word	(downward arrow) Lowered pitch
>>word<<	(more than and less than) Quicker speech
<<word>>	(less than & more than) Slowed speech
<	(less than) Talk is jump-started—starting with a rush
hh	(series of h's) Aspiration or laughter
[ ]	(brackets) simultaneous or overlapping speech
[ ]	(brackets) simultaneous or overlapping speech
=	(equal sign) Latch or contiguous utterances of the same speaker
(2.4)	(number in parentheses) Length of a silence in 10ths of a second
(.)	(period in parentheses) Micro-pause, 0.2 second or less
((gazing toward the ceiling))	(double parentheses) Description of non-speech activity.
\$word\$	(dollar signs) Smiley voice
#word#	(number signs) Squeaky voice
<i>word</i>	(italicized) Japanese word
(word)	(parentheses) English translation of Japanese word



## Appendix B

## Group Discussion 1

Line	Speaker	Talk
1	Niko	So:: what I thought about the video is that uhm, ↑I think
2		that can be kind of monomane (impersonation) entertainment
3		but I felt like that like the way they like- their fashion I mean
4		their- they put some like- you know the- the cream I don't
5		kno:w what they're using it- >>I'm not sure they're<< want
6		to like precisely like (1.0) how do I say say it? Just copy like
7		what- >>copy it exactly<< but I don't feel that it's
8		appropriate in some sense, I thought there's more racism in
9		that video compared to Katy Perry's one. °yeah° (4.0) How
10		about- what do you think? (3.0)
11	Chizu	But it's just like mimicry tournament or like competition
12		ri:ght so the point of entertainment just try to (1.0) uh
13		mimic [uhh the-] but if I were in the people in the U.S.,
14	Niko	[yeah]
15	Chizu	I didn't feel comfortable about that >>because they are
16		like<< enjoying clapping hands and like- yeah I don't feel
17		comfortable °if I were American° (3.0)
18	Aya	hh eh I- actually I don't think <<this is racism>> uh
19		↑sorry this is only the Japanese point of view. They just
20		enjoying monomane hh or, how- uhh I think this is just
21		famous- >>the Japanese people<< do monomane for
22		[Japanese people] so:: if the Japanese people do the
23	Niko	[yeah]
24	Aya	monomane for Japanese people there's no problem, ev-
25		even though they don't understand the person- person but
26		n:: I- (2.0) \$in my opinion\$ it's same as this- as these
27		[monomane] so:: but maybe my perspective-
28	Niko	[yeah]
29	Aya	nandaro (How can I explain this.) uh- point- nandaro narrow
30		point of view (2.0) don't- don't many people don't think
32		same as me °so°=
33	Niko	=No no I don't know maybe like- I think maybe most of
34		the people think that they're just enjoying that as an
35		entertainment but >>sometimes I feel that<< those
36		monomane like Japanese person mimicking other Japanese
37		comedian maybe celebrities, I sometimes feel that ↑oh
38		they're just making fun of it like you kno:w I know they're
39		not maybe but it seems like they're <u>over</u> reaction like
40		[overacting]
41	Aya	[uhh]
42	Niko	over- you know ↑sometimes I feel like if I were the one who
43		were mimicked by others, and like just showed the other
44		person- other people <<I feel kind of>> bad (1.0) [maybe]
45	Aya	[mmm]
46	Niko	they're laughing at what I am behaving in front of people
47		ri:ght [so sometimes] monomane in particular I don't (1.0)
48	Aya	[mm mm]
49	Niko	of course I like it- I love it- I enjoy it but sometimes I feel
50		like although it- although they didn't include other

51 countries' people like only with Japanese people I think  
52 there's some racism or some kind of you know, mocking  
53 yeah=  
54 Aya =mmm  
55 Niko <<that's what I thought>> †but I love it so yeah, it's really  
56 based on how people perceive it (10.0) and sometimes it  
57 can be said as parodi- (parody) parod;y parody can be similar  
58 to monomane but it's similar to this problem where many  
59 you know like films just put the parody of other celebrities  
60 or other countries' cultural behavior and make like some  
61 enjoyable scenes ri:ght those parody can sometimes be  
62 black I mean they can sometimes be recognized as racism  
63 so I think it is very difficult °yeah°

## Appendix C

## Group Discussion 2

Line	Speaker	Talk
1	Sota	↑Alright so the topic was does that movie cultural appro-
2		appropriation or not. Which do you think is it? (6.0)
3	Ken	Again I think it <<depends on how>> (3.0) how- what
4		words can people think when seeing this.
5	Sota	[hmm]
6	Saki	[Yes.]
7	Ken	(3.0) mmm
8	Saki	If I was just watching that- that video in the TV or
9		something maybe I just enjoyed that content as an
10		entertainment but we were looking- we were looking the
11		video in this discussion like in the view point from the
12		whether it is racism or not so I get some feeling that it
13		might be harmful or like looking down the culture like the
14		people involving in that culture so get- I think it might be
15		harmful for people who live in that culture=
16	Ken	=mmm (2.0)
17	Sota	We::ll if it's- if it- yeah I think this is- that video should
18		be in the entertainment section but if I- I have one question
19		the singer his name is Yamadera-san. Does he actually
20		have to paint his color- skin color black. [If you-] ↑If you
21	Saki	[No]
22	Sota	wanted to like share his skill of <i>monomane</i> (impersonation) or
23		voice of trumpet, I think he didn't really have to color or paint
24		his face to make it look like- I- I don't think this is
25		necessarity of doing that=
26	Saki	=aha=
27	Sota	=Yeah in a manner of that I think it's <u>sort- a little bit-</u> it
28		includes a little bit of cultural appro-appropriation
29		because- yeah he is a <i>monomane</i> - or I think he is a <i>seiyu</i> (voice
30		actor) or <i>monomane</i> (1.0) I don't know which one but his main
31		strength is the voice not how he looks like, he didn't need
32		to actually paint his face black in my opinion. (18.0)
33	Ken	Yeah I thi- I don't (1.0) hmm I don't completely agree
34		to your argument. I think his goal is to become <<as
35		close to real>> as possible.
36	Sota	What for? Is it to <u>entertain</u> people?
37	Ken	↑Well I think that's the point of <i>monomane</i> .=
38	Sota	=mm=
39	Ken	=Like for example, like (1.0) I don't know like they- for
40		example if they do <i>monomane</i> of like an old person they
41		would draw like <i>shiwa</i> (wrinkles) like wrinkles on their faces. I
42		don't know like it's just mm (9.0) °yeah° (2.0) like for example
43		if you see like uh:: like uh American comedian trying to
44		mimic a Japanese enka singer and then they're coloring
45		their skin like I don't know like yellow-ish or a little bit
46		more (2.0) ↑not like the real yellow like the Simpsons but
47		like really close to how Asian people's color is, I don't
48		think that's really racist. I just feel like they're trying to be
49		as realistic as possible.=
50	Sota	=mmm=

- 51 Ken =And I think that's the same for- like I didn't- I didn't  
52 think that his painting was exaggerating or anything.  
53 So from that point I didn't really [feel-] ↑but as I said if uh  
54 Sota [mmm]  
55 Ken people with dark skin color actually felt like racist then  
56 it would be racist.  
57 Sota Yeah it really depends on how target actually thinks right.  
58 What they actually think. Yeah it's up on them. But yeah  
59 we should try to avoid it as much as possible but it's  
60 actually difficult for us to metacog- cognition. [Yeah so]  
61 Ken [mhm]  
62 Sota So:: like what Ken said before it's difficult for us to  
63 understand the whole culture in the world so just- yeah it's  
64 necessary for us to understand the best as we can like  
65 what's in front of us. In that way Black Lives Matter was  
66 much more rela;tive to us. It was like big news, everyone  
67 had chance to be exposed to that news but yeah just like  
68 in the article Rich and Hida some people didn't find it  
69 relative to us which kinda makes me sad. (3.0)
-