

# Understanding the In-class Behavior Patterns of Japanese University Students in EFL Classes: A Foreign English Teacher's Perspective

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## Abstract

This article identifies and examines the in-class behavior patterns of Japanese university students in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes at the tertiary level. In any classroom setting, teachers may feel dissatisfaction when their expectations of learners' in-class behaviors are incongruent with those actually displayed by the learners. For foreign EFL teachers teaching in Japanese universities, this incongruency can reveal itself in the form of a teacher-perceived lack of activity and initiative demonstrated by their learners. In order to overcome these feelings of dissatisfaction with Japanese university learners' behaviors in university EFL settings, it is necessary to identify what these in-class behavior patterns are and understand why they exist. Upon recognizing and understanding the type of in-class behavior patterns and the related attitudes brought forth by learners into the Japanese university EFL classroom, teachers can then formulate and implement more learner-inclusive expectations and pedagogical practices that are more suitable for their teaching environment.

## Background

Corresponding to globalization and English as a lingua franca, educational reforms from Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) have stipulated the substantial enhancement of English education at all elementary and secondary school levels (MEXT, 2014). This has resulted in a gradual transition of EFL instruction from traditional, grammar-oriented approaches to more of a comprehensive one, consisting of communicative approaches derived from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). However, this push for enhancing communicative competence and oral participation among EFL learners still contains a major divide between stated educational ideals and actual practice (King, 2013). Despite having completed six years of English education during secondary school, many students entering university have had little practice in how to conduct a practical conversation (Talandis & Stout, 2014). In-class conversations and interactions with university students often contain long gaps of silence, short answers, and follow a rigid question-answer form (Talandis & Stout, 2014). Moreover, reticent rather than

active participation can be seen, particularly in first-year EFL required courses that students take. This results in a situation with classrooms being filled with students who lack interest, motivation, and proficiency and the teachers teaching these required classes face uphill battles in getting their students to carry out the simplest of conversations (Talandis & Stout, 2014).

In order to understand the aforementioned in-class behavior patterns of Japanese university students in EFL courses, it is necessary to identify key elements in Japanese linguistic, psychological, sociocultural, and communication practices that can explain such behaviors (Hayashi & Cherry, 2004). Teachers need to take these unobservable factors into consideration as they often emerge in real-time in-class instruction and practice (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Once these factors and their causes are acknowledged, teachers can work to bridge the gap between their learner expectations and their learners' in-class behaviors by carrying out more culturally-inclusive pedagogical practices and strategies which can effectively scaffold the in-class practice and development of EFL communicative competence.

### **A Word of Caution Regarding Cultural Labels**

As stated by Hammond (2007), the following descriptions of culturally influenced behaviors should be viewed as tendencies and not as immutable labels on Japanese university learners. For the empathetic development of foreign EFL teachers in Japan, it is suggested to become as informed as possible regarding the educational and sociocultural backgrounds of such learners. If not, when faced with a cultural mismatch of expectations in EFL classroom settings, it is possible to experience bouts of frustration, disapproval, and annoyance, leading to subsequent blame placed on the learners for their behaviors. A loss of motivation, a sense of negativity, and resignation may ensue, and when this happens, both the teacher and learners suffer. Following Norris' (2004) suggestion that both foreign EFL teachers and Japanese learners need to make some cultural adjustments in the classroom, it is advisable for the foreign EFL teachers to take the first step in gaining cultural awareness as they are the curators of the classroom and resulting learning outcomes.

### **A Clash of Communication Styles**

Interlocutors from different cultures face barriers to understanding that go beyond language (Miller, 1995). Ellis and Ellis (2014) found that in Japanese secondary schools, an analysis of grammar forms, translation, and oral repetition permeate classroom settings. In Japanese high schools, lectures from teachers occur much more frequently than student

discussions because the primary goal of teacher instruction is to transmit information rather than the development of critical thinking skills or self-expression. In EFL classrooms, the Western values embedded in CLT place a much greater emphasis on process and meaning over content and form, possibly leading to anxiety and poor performance among learners in classroom interactions (Tsui, 1996). Maftoon and Ziafar (2013) expressed that Japanese language learners are not adapted to Western teaching practices which involve individualization, challenging the teacher, and sharing original opinions. Rather they consider their in-class role to be that of a quiet and passive learner, attributes with which Harumi (2010) described as defensive and listening strategies to help them save face, avoid difficulties, and requiring the need to ask for help.

The following table provides a summary of communication styles between Japanese and Western culture, derived from Miller (1995).

Table 1. *Summary of Japanese and Western Communication Styles, based on Miller (1995)*

Japanese Culture	Western Culture	Description
Low self-disclosure	High self-disclosure	Attitudes about the extent to which the private self should be exposed in interpersonal encounters
Group-consciousness	Individualism	The value placed on group consciousness from an individual
Consensus decision making	Autonomous decision making	The value placed on unanimous support regarding decision making
High status consciousness	Low status consciousness	The value that all participants possess or do not possess equal worth on deciding when or when not to speak
Self-restraint listening	Attentive feedback	The issue of attention or non-attention to status of varying cultural roles assigned to listeners
Orderly turn-taking	Floor competition	The flow of turn-taking and topic management in a conversation or discussion

### **The Culture of University Entrance Examinations in Japan**

For many Japanese secondary school students there is no immediate need nor pressure to acquire communicative English skills due to the reasoning that such skills are not required for university entrance examinations. Secondary school students engage in the study of “juken eigo” (English for entrance examinations), which primarily emphasize grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and more recently listening comprehension (King, 2013). As the university entrance exam test dates get closer, students expect their teachers to focus on “juken eigo” as passing or failing the university entrance exams can affect one’s future work career

and life trajectory. Ellis and Ellis (2014, p.7) stated that “the university entrance examination is the primary sorting device for careers in Japanese society”. As long as the entrance exams continue to occupy a powerful determining role in Japanese education, those who are faced with immediate pressures to pass entrance examinations will inevitably focus on “juken eigo” rather than communicative English (Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004). Along with little practice and experience of speaking English in class and having passively taken lecture-orientated, information heavy classes in secondary school, it is no surprise that a reluctance among learners to speak has been described as the greatest problem in teaching English in Japan (Bradley, 2013).

### **Japanese Learners’ Use of Silence**

In EFL classrooms at all education levels, it is not uncommon to witness Japanese students exhibit extended periods of silence during EFL interactions. When interaction between students and a foreign EFL teacher occurs, a potential source of conflict may arise as the teacher may not be able to interpret what the Learners’ expression of silence means, why it occurs, and how to appropriately react. Richmond and Vannieu (2019) argued that this “wall of silence” created Japanese learners represents a cultural mismatch of learner expectations. In Western culture, when students are directly asked a question by a teacher in classroom settings, students are accustomed to the cultural norm of responding promptly in order to not “hold the floor” and take up a lot of time (Richmond & Vannieu, 2019). In addition, if the students do not know the answer or how to respond, a brief “I do not know” would suffice as this facilitates dialogue between interlocutors in a quick-thinking and timely manner. Japanese learners’ lengthy silence can be attributed to searching for a correct answer, whether by asking nearby classmates, feverously searching in their textbook, or even a blank stare ahead while searching in their head (Richmond & Vannieu, 2019). This need to provide a “correct answer” has been reinforced by years of university examination preparation in which learners have been trained to avoid mistakes and not answer questions unless they are sure of the answer (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). Harumi (1999) investigated the differences or similarities of how Japanese and British study participants interpreted video recorded sessions of Japanese EFL university students’ use of classroom silence during interactions with teachers. After watching the videos, the Japanese study participants interpreted the Japanese EFL students’ silence as face-saving, a difficulty-avoidance strategy, or a silent request for help, all of which were deemed acceptable and tolerable (Harumi, 1999). The British participants on the other hand, interpreted the Japanese EFL students’ classroom

silence as signs of disinterest, boredom, and laziness, leading Harumi (1999) to conclude that the British study participants' tolerance to silence was very low compared to the Japanese study participants'. Harumi (2010) also conducted a study to identify Japanese EFL university students' reasons for remaining silent during in-class exchanges with foreign EFL teachers. Her findings suggested that 67.2% of the students' primary reasons for remaining silent were due to linguistic problems (a lack of vocabulary, difficulties with expressing oneself in English, comprehension and listening issues, and self-doubts about grammatical accuracy) and 22.8% of students cited psychological and contextual reasons (a lack of confidence, time pressure, a tense atmosphere, difficulty of target language, nervousness, shyness, pronunciation issues, and a tendency to depend on others). Although the subject of Japanese learners' use of silence in EFL classrooms is more complex than what has been stated here, these observations can be useful for foreign EFL teachers to develop more insight into how their learners may be strongly influenced by Japanese cultural and educational norms in regard to the use of silence in classroom environments.

### **The Listeners' Responsibility in Japanese Culture**

Norris (2004) described that in Western cultures, it is considered the speaker's responsibility to make sure a message has been communicated to others clearly and if the speaker fails, the listener can ask for clarification and the speaker will rephrase his or her remarks. In Japanese culture, the responsibility for interpreting a message falls more on the listener, who may not request clarification despite not having understood the message due to embarrassment. This extends into the classroom and as Anderson (1993) noted, this embarrassment plays a major role in the reticent behavior patterns of Japanese students in schools. According to Takanashi (2004), understanding what a speaker's true intentions are through inferences is more important than expressing one's ideas effectively. Therefore, Japanese daily communication styles need less overt interaction in the form of direct messages and words between the interlocutors with neither party expected to request clarification nor give negative opinions during communication, particularly when dealing with people in lower/higher status positions (Takanashi, 2004). In Japanese secondary schools, the students serve their role as passive listeners and come to observe the teacher as an authoritative lecturer due to preparation for the university entrance exams. The manner in which students relate with their peers and teachers is fundamentally different from that of Western cultures and therefore, this leads to the development of different interactional expectations for each other (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008).

## **Groupism**

In a Japanese classroom, the pressure of the group may be far stronger than it appears. Most students do not want to differentiate themselves from the group and will try to appear modest. In the EFL classroom, students may lack confidence with their English proficiency and have difficulty with outwardly expressing their ideas, partly due to the presence of other students in the classroom. Japanese learners have a tendency to be silent when they are not sure whether their answers are right or if their ideas differ from those of others (King, 2013). This represents the Japanese cultural norm of “groupism” in which the opinion and behavior of a group is valued more highly than that of the individual (Harumi, 2010). This value can stifle the open expression of original thought and the sharing of ideas found requisite in CLT-orientated EFL classrooms. Hence, Japanese learners are often caught in the mental conundrum of deciding whether or not to present answers that match peer consensus or express their personal opinion at the possible sacrifice of group harmony. Japanese university EFL classes are filled with a combination of students who do not know how to respond and will not try (fear of making mistakes) and those who know how to respond, but will not try due to the fear of standing out or appearing to show off (Hammond, 2007). The large class sizes for EFL courses in Japanese universities can also have over 30 members in a class, making it difficult for teachers to manage students and facilitate in-class activities with high levels of active learner involvement. Smaller class sizes are much more conducive to language practice opportunities, active participation, and students’ deeper understanding of language items (Takanashi, 2004). In large classes, the class members may also not know each other well and it is common to see the rapid development of smaller cliques based on friendship, affiliation to a club activity, university major, or shared faculty and association. Despite being members of the same class, these smaller group affiliations are very strong and members within the groups tend to not willingly associate or communicate with those outside the group unless otherwise instructed to. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to switch groups frequently or else there may be little to almost no interaction between the students in the foreign language (L2).

## **Japanese University Students’ Archetypes**

The foreign EFL teacher also needs to be aware of how Japanese students view their university experience within the framework of their overall life experience. After undergoing “examination hell” in preparation and completion of university entrance exams, many

Japanese students experienced an education filled with high levels of strict regulation and the lack of independence (Norris, 2004). Although the learners have exercised ideals such as endurance, effort, and self-denial, once they make it into universities, they can be far behind in the socialization process compared to Western counterparts (Norris, 2004). For many students, university becomes a period of self-exploration and the development of individuality and identity, instead of being a time of intense academic study (Hawley-Nagatomo, 2012). Kelly (1993) classified Japanese university students into three broadly defined types: Club Types, Society Types, and School Types. A description can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Japanese University Student Types, based on Kelly (1993)*

Club Types	Society Types	School Types
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heavily involved in shared group activities such as sports clubs</li> <li>• First priority is given to clubs as it takes up most of their free time</li> <li>• May be less enthusiastic in the classroom due to tiredness and club commitments</li> <li>• Intensive education in group dynamics and learning how to handle responsibility, both qualities that Japanese employers are looking for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energy and free time are devoted to part-time jobs, establishing social relationships, travel, romance</li> <li>• Prioritize the freedom to control their own lives, giving a sense of adulthood and independence as they can control the environment that previously controlled them</li> <li>• The competitive atmosphere of the school or club do not suit them, thus were most likely not to be high achievers in high school due to a highly regulated environment</li> <li>• Motivation and self-esteem issues may be issues in the classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoy studying and have chosen this path towards understanding life</li> <li>• Tend to get the highest grades</li> <li>• Tend to show strongest interest in foreign language studies</li> </ul>

Kelly's (1993) distinctions do not completely define any individual university student, but serve to represent general tendencies, common interests, or observable mindsets of Japanese university students. In reality, each student possesses a combination of attributes from the three student types and beyond. Furthermore, each student can be considered industrious to various extent, in their own way, for their own intentions and purposes. The key point is for foreign EFL teachers to develop and possess a sociocultural awareness of where their university students belong on the wide spectrum of life experiences and what their general expectations of their university experience, based on Japanese cultural norms. There are competing culturally-connected interests belonging to those of the foreign EFL teacher, their expectations of the learners, and what the students expect and are working towards in their university lives.

## **Effective Pedagogical Practices for Japanese Communication Styles**

Many longtime foreign EFL teachers living in Japan and teaching at universities here have utilized their in-class teaching experiences and their accumulated cultural awareness to implement “Japanese learner-friendly” approaches to narrow the cultural gap that may exist in EFL classes. Instead of resisting or rejecting Japanese styles of communication, the key focus is for foreign teachers is to build on the communicative tendencies prevalent among Japanese learners and then selectively incorporate aspects of Western communicative styles and CLT which are conducive for successful L2 practice and development.

One of the quickest and most important things a foreign EFL teacher can do to improve their current teaching state is to learn about Japanese sociocultural norms, communicative styles, and the educational background and experiences of Japanese students at all levels of schooling. With this knowledge in mind and hand, foreign EFL teachers can be readily prepared for understanding their students’ in-class behaviors. Prior to stepping inside a university-level EFL class, Japanese students already expect a difference in instruction and communication styles and are generally open towards a new learning experience brought forth by their foreign teachers. The in-class behaviors typically demonstrated by Japanese students such as hesitating to speak in front of a group or lacking the initiative to openly volunteer answers should be met with patience and an adjustment in pedagogical strategy instead of overly demanding expectations of Japanese learners to demonstrate L2 interactions in Western communication styles over a short time of learning and practice. Teachers are encouraged to extend their own tolerance as Harumi (2010) indicated that Japanese EFL students are inclined to participate more when they see their teachers empathize with their use of silence.

Another immense challenge faced by foreign EFL teachers is knowing how to stimulate active L2 interactions and participation among their students during in-class time. It is critical to understand that Japanese students’ passivity during EFL classes can often be due to simply not knowing what to do, say, or how to “be active” in class. Not only in foreign language studies, but also in their native Japanese tongue, many learners seem to have little experience and are usually untrained in expressing their own views or in speaking about themselves (Arza, Ikezawa, Rowlett, & Vannieuwenhuyse, 2005). Therefore, an obvious, yet vital first step towards dealing with such a challenge is letting the students know that they are expected to speak, express, and share their opinions actively in the EFL classroom. By informing them of this, such a statement can free learners from the constraints of the traditional Japanese classroom setting. As Japanese learners are not accustomed to volunteering to speak or



openly present their answers in large group settings, the teacher may want to inform students beforehand that they will have eventually need to present an answer or response to the class. This method of giving the learners some preparation time to think, discuss, and formulate responses in pairs or groups, prior to presenting their answers to a larger group, much better suits Japanese communicative styles. Lengthening wait times for answers and informing and allowing learners to say “I don’t know” can alleviate students who feel stuck not knowing what to say or do in response to a question (Schnickel, 2019). Lastly, accepting and encouraging all learner contributions openly presented in class in another way of reducing learner anxiety and increasing learner confidence.

### **“The Teachers are Boring”**

Ellis and Ellis’s (2014) research into why Japanese university students sleep in EFL classes instructed by both foreign and Japanese EFL teachers revealed that boredom was one of the primary reasons. Students attributed their boredom to a lack of interest in what teachers were saying or the topics were not relevant nor interesting. Teaching-dominated talking throughout class time, routinely copying down what was written in textbooks or PowerPoint slides, and the lack of engaging visual aids were other factors mentioned (Ellis & Ellis, 2014). In many non-EFL courses, Japanese university learners attend and passively listen to teacher-fronted lectures in which course notes are often read by the teacher for the entire class and they become accustomed to this communication style (Takanashi, 2004). A lack of teacher encouragement and opportunity for learners to voice ideas or engage in shared discussions can also lead to learners’ perceptions of boredom in EFL classroom settings.

Resourceful lesson planning and careful consideration of the learners’ needs is necessary to overcome the sense of boredom felt by learners in the classroom. In any foreign language course, being able to use and practice L2 in classroom interactions is one of the simplest and most crucial learning opportunities a teacher can afford learners. By giving ownership of some of the lesson back to the students in the form of various tasks that require learners’ L2 oral output can give learners a sense of engagement and purpose. Establishing clear learning objectives, giving clear and easy-to-understand instructions, modeling tasks, scaffolding the learners with relevant linguistic content, and providing consistent opportunities to use L2 can give learners an effective framework to follow for each class. A wide range of communicative activities in the form of paired conversations, group discussions, structured role-plays, debates, storytelling, games, information-gap tasks, and classmate questionnaires can establish the communicative and collaborative context requisite for Japanese learners

to feel comfortable in using L2 proactively. As long as the learners are put in positions and opportunities in which they feel that they are not confined by the cultural rules imposed on classroom behavior, they may be able to open up and express themselves more freely.

### **“Let’s Work Together”**

Beyond elementary school, group work is seldom practiced in Japanese secondary school classrooms. Japanese culture’s focus on groupism does not necessarily reflect productive group work, particularly when it comes to EFL settings. During in-class activities and tasks, there may be instances in which some students are left out or they may not be used to working in groups and need additional support. At other times, students may be unwilling to actively participate and contribute to the group discussion or the completion of a designated task. This reticence to participate may be related to a lack of confidence in expressing one’s ideas, a fear of making mistakes, or a lack of L2 proficiency in comparison to the group or others. Assigning member roles during group-related activities can prompt higher levels of engagement and activity among students in EFL settings. For instance, in a group of three, one student can be the “director” in leading the group discussion, another member can be the “secretary” who is responsible for taking notes, while the third member is the “reporter” who needs to report the group’s answers back to the class. Having peers discuss subjects in pairs or groups prior to a wider discussion was found to have a positive impact on learners’ willingness to communicate (WTC) as it gives “students a chance to rehearse their thoughts to each other in a low risk, high gain situation” (Tsui, 1996, p. 148). Working in pairs or small groups can be a great way to relieve students from the fears of addressing the entire class by themselves as well.

### **Pragmatic Competence Instruction**

The impression that Japanese university students feel uncomfortable taking risks and clarifying meaning during in-class interactions suggests that the instruction of pragmatic L2 communication strategies would be of significant benefit to them. Hayashi & Cherry (2004) stated that by learning the communicative template (L2 strategic competence) in which to place the language they are learning and have learned (L2 linguistic content), this would much better enable learners to actively engage in L2 oral interactions. Through the explicit teaching of conversation strategies and emphasis placed on pragmatic aspects of oral communication, this can help students negotiate meaning to solve interactional difficulties

(Richmond & Vannieu, 2019). In Table 3, a suggested list of effective pragmatic competence strategies for EFL learners is provided by Talandis and Stout (2014).

Table 3. *Conversation Strategies based on (Talandis & Stout, 2014)*

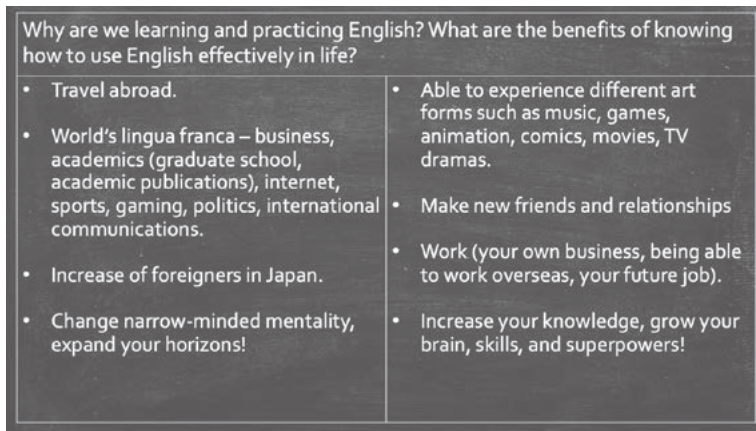
Conversation Strategies	Example Expressions
Ask for repetition	"Pardon?", "Excuse me?", "Once more please?"
Express a lack of understanding	"I don't understand", "What does ____ mean?"
Ask for vocabulary help	"How do you say ____ in English?"
Giving longer answers by answering implicit questions	A: Do you have a part-time job? B: Yes, I work (where?), as a (job title?), (when?) on Fridays.
Vary conversation patterns by talking about themselves sometimes	A: Do you play any sports? B: Yes, I play tennis a few times a week. A: Oh really? So do I. I'm in the tennis club.
Bounce questions back	"How about you?"
Show interest by reacting	"Oh yeah?", "Oh really?", "I see"
React to good or bad news with surprise	"Wow!", "Great!", "Oh no!", "That's too bad"
Listen actively via back-channel feedback	"Uh-huh", "Mm-hm", "I see"
Shadowing	Repeat key words with a rising intonation to react, get time to think, or actively listen.
Get time to think of an answer	"Um", "Hm", "Ah", "Let me see", "That's a good question"

### Providing Motivational Feedback to Learners

Giving positive feedback to students who take the risk to speak in class is one of the easiest and productive things a teacher can do. When correcting a learner's mistake, try to offer a positive comment prior to pointing out the mistake. Solely emphasizing and focusing on learner errors can cause the learners to do the same as well, so it is more advantageous to make students feel good about themselves and aid in motivating them to try again. Increased teacher immediacy and involvement with students in direct conversations, having time for students, and expressing interest in their work, were also found to reduce learner anxiety and increase WTC (Wen & Clement, 2003). Such actions were found to increase group cohesion and improve the overall classroom environment. Moreover, highlighting the benefits of English learning through in-class discussions and teacher talk, can let learners know why they are in the EFL classroom and some of the associated benefits of being there. A simple PowerPoint with some key benefits of learning and practicing L2 can be presented to,

explained, and discussed by learners, displayed below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Sample PowerPoint Slide of the Benefits of Effective English Use*



Why are we learning and practicing English? What are the benefits of knowing how to use English effectively in life?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Travel abroad.</li><li>• World's lingua franca – business, academics (graduate school, academic publications), internet, sports, gaming, politics, international communications.</li><li>• Increase of foreigners in Japan.</li><li>• Change narrow-minded mentality, expand your horizons!</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Able to experience different art forms such as music, games, animation, comics, movies, TV dramas.</li><li>• Make new friends and relationships</li><li>• Work (your own business, being able to work overseas, your future job).</li><li>• Increase your knowledge, grow your brain, skills, and superpowers!</li></ul>

## Conclusion

University in Japan is an important period of transition and personal development in which socialization processes and individuality are being discovered by many students. Upon recognition of university learners' mindsets and how cultural influences can impact their communicative style and behavior, the foreign EFL teacher can turn a potentially frustrating in-class teaching experience into one that displays empathy and understanding. The objective is to create a comfortable classroom environment that is stimulating, rewarding, and educational for both the learners and teacher. By going beyond the immediate confines of the EFL classroom and seeing how the larger environment and contextual factors impact Japanese learners, only then can we begin to understand what the learners need and what we as teachers can do to support them pedagogically.

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