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Pretending to Understand Among Japanese Language Learners: An Investigation of Occurrence Contexts and Associated Emotions

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ABSTRACT
The fact that second language learners commonly employ "pretending to understand" as a communication strategy should be evident to anyone with experience living in a foreign language environment or involved in foreign language education. This study investigates the experiences of pretending to understand among international undergraduate students enrolled at Japanese universities. Using text mining methodology with KH Coder software, this research clarifies in what situations pretending to understand is likely to occur and what emotions are experienced when engaging in this behavior. The survey was conducted from late 2020 to spring 2023 with 142 international undergraduate students averaging N3-N2 Japanese language proficiency level. In contrast to attaining a sense of being part of the group or feeling of achievement, as suggested in prior research, a majority of international students are shown to experience guilty feelings and negative emotions when pretending to understand. Analysis revealed that 43.4% of nouns, 81.3% of adjectival nouns, and up to 86.3% of adjectives used in responses expressed negative emotions. Given that prior research indicates negative emotions may impede learning, this study proposes that Japanese language educators develop further understanding of the phenomenon of pretending to understand, which can lead to loss of confidence and self-reproach among learners.

Keywords*: pretending to understand; avoidance of clarification requests; language anxiety; international students; communication strategies.*

INTRODUCTION

Second language learners occasionally employ “pretending to understand” (the practice of indicating or stating that they understand, or responding “yes” to the either implicit or explicit questioning of their understanding, despite not actually understanding) as a communication strategy when conversations in the target language become incomprehensible. Despite understanding the importance of “negotiation for meaning” (Long, 1996) and “requests for clarification” (Ozaki, 1992; Thomson, 1994), many learners refrain from negotiating for meaning, due to a belief that excessive clarification requests irritate interlocutors. Foster (1998, p.18) finds many students “disinclined to initiate or pursue negotiation for meaning,” and as Pica (1994, p.519) states, “Too many clarification questions can be downright annoying.” Consequently, learners frequently “pretend to understand” due to factors such as consideration for their interlocutors’ feelings, peer pressure, and temporal constraints.

To the best of this author’s knowledge, no prior research directly addresses pretending to understand among Japanese language learners, and even studies targeting English learners are scarce. Foster (1998) suggests that pretending to understand occurs when external factors make negotiation for difficult. She identifies a “pretend and hope” strategy that contrasts with “check and clarify,” defining it as “hoping a future utterance will cast light on your darkness (it very often does)” (p.18). Foster argues that this strategy provides learners with a sense of belonging to their English-speaking peer group, and an attendant sense of achievement (p. 19).

However, the extent to which "pretending to understand" functions as a conscious strategic choice versus an anxiety-driven response may depend significantly on the social context of language use. While Foster's (1998) learners in peer-group settings may have experienced strategic agency in their decision to "pretend and hope," Japanese language learners navigating hierarchical social structures may experience this behavior less as a chosen strategy and more as a constrained response to communicative and social pressures.

For second language learners, indicating or stating "I understand" when comprehension is in fact lacking may result in an inability to determine whether critical information has been missed, potentially causing loss of confidence and anxiety. Teramura (1987) identifies "the tension that everyone feels when listening before becoming sufficiently accustomed to a foreign language" as a catalyst. A cycle may emerge, therefore, in which the tension associated with listening comprehension subsequently leads to anxiety arising from an awareness of missing information.

Considering the social position of many Japanese language learners currently studying in Japan, it can be theorized that the behavior of pretending to understand in various situations does not necessarily produce exclusively positive outcomes such as a "sense of belonging" or "sense of achievement." Rather, a vicious circle, arising from social anxiety manifested as a desire not be rude to the other person, and resulting in anxiety about having possibly missed important information, is considered a more likely outcome. From this perspective, among Japanese language learners at least, pretending to understand may be considered an expression of language anxiety. Among the three types of "foreign language anxiety" proposed by Horowitz et al. (1986) – (1) communication apprehension, (2) test anxiety, and (3) fear of negative evaluation – the author considers that at a minimum, (1) communication apprehension and (3) fear of negative evaluation can be identified within such students' behavior.

State of the Art and Gap in Literature

Apart from Foster (1998), studies in this field targeting English learners are scarce. Terui (2012) identifies ten background factors for pretending to understand among English learners at American universities, including protecting self-esteem, responding to social pressure, coping with anxiety, and considering others' feelings. She compares this to elderly individuals pretending to hear clearly despite hearing loss, noting that both international students and elderly individuals face not only hearing and understanding limitations, but also a need to accept the diminishing of their previous social roles (p. 180).

According to Hatch (1992, p. 22), learners' pretending to understand may lead to overestimation of language abilities by others, and that as such "there are pluses and minuses to the use of faking strategies. Communication can continue relatively smoothly, but it may also break down completely since information that allows the participants to build a common theme or focus is missing". She concludes that consequently, pretending to understand does not promote development of competence in the second language.

Ozaki (2001) addresses a very similar phenomenon to pretending to understand among Japanese language learners. In interviews with Brazilian nationals working in Japan, the study examines the frequent use of the strategy of "avoidance of clarification requests" in Japanese.

Among interview subjects, individuals were identified who "could have said 'I don't understand' at any time, yet appear hesitant [*chūcho suru*], or trying to avoid doing so [*sakeyouto suru*]." The study states that "this can be considered to reflect the consciousness of L2 speakers who do not wish to be exposed as having insufficient Japanese language ability" (Ozaki, 2001, p. 88). Furthermore, the subjects' relatively low social status is identified as a factor. Since over 90% of international students who were survey subjects in this research are self-funded students from Asian countries, it can be assumed that in a majority of contact situations where Japanese is used (such as universities and part-time jobs), they feel, or are made to feel, that they are speaking with so-called "social superiors." It is therefore not difficult to imagine that this very "social status" functions as a factor in their pretending to understand.

Conceptualizing 'Pretending to Understand': Strategy or Anxiety Response?

The phenomenon of "pretending to understand" exists on a continuum between deliberate strategic choice and anxiety-driven psychological response. Communication strategy research frames learner behaviors as conscious, goal-oriented choices to overcome communicative difficulties (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997), while language anxiety research conceptualizes them as psychological responses to fear-inducing situations, with

communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation driving avoidance behaviors (Horwitz et al., 1986). The distinction has significant implications for understanding learner behavior and designing pedagogical interventions.

This study proposes that context determines where specific instances fall on this continuum. Three key factors influence whether "pretending to understand" functions as strategy or anxiety response: (1) power dynamics—in hierarchical contexts where learners interact with "social superiors," perceived alternatives may be severely constrained, making what appears as "choice" feel psychologically unavoidable; (2) social consequences—in Japanese contexts emphasizing harmony (*wa*) and not imposing on others, clarification requests may be perceived as face-threatening acts; and (3) emotional consequences—genuinely strategic behavior typically produces satisfaction or relief, while anxiety-driven behavior produces guilt, shame, and loss of confidence.

This study therefore examines "pretending to understand" as a phenomenon that, while technically constituting a communication strategy (a behavioral choice not to request clarification), may in practice function as a manifestation of language anxiety in contexts characterized by hierarchical power relations and strong social norms. The research investigates whether Japanese language learners' experiences align more closely with Foster's (1998) model of strategic agency producing positive emotions, or with an anxiety-driven model producing negative emotional consequences.

Negative Emotions and Language Learning

Beginning with Horowitz et al. (1986), numerous studies describe the negative impact of anxiety on language learning (Dewaele, 2007; Gardner & MacIntyre, 2012; Nishitani & Matsuda, 2003). MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) define language anxiety as “worry and negative, fear-related emotions associated with learning or using a language that is not an individual’s mother tongue” (p. 103). Feelings of guilt from pretending to understand, therefore, may have a negative impact on subsequent language learning.

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis (Fig.1) proposes that negative emotions such as anxiety and loss of confidence activate an "affective filter" that reduces input quantity and prevents input from reaching language acquisition mechanisms, making acquisition difficult. Suzuki (2017) connects negative feelings around language learning to low self-esteem, low ambiguity tolerance, risk aversion, and identity issues. If learners perceive pretending to understand as failure, therefore, there is a possibility that the practice itself may impede learning.

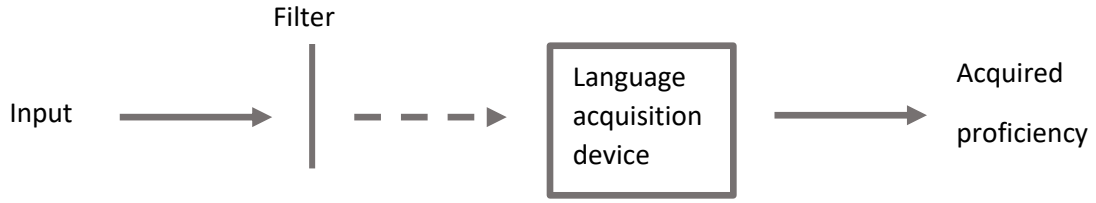

Figure 1. Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen 1982)

While dividing emotions into "positive" and "negative" may be overly simplistic (Kristjánsson, 2003), and it has been noted in prior research that negative emotions and language anxiety can sometimes motivate further study (Kayi-Aydar, 2022; Oxford, 1999), this paper examines whether emotions experienced when pretending to understand are more often positive (Foster's "sense of belonging" and "feeling of achievement") or negative (feelings of shame or worry). This paper adopts Kayi-Aydar's (2022, p. 1079) definition of negative emotions as "generally considered unpleasant and not valued in certain cultures": emotions such as "anxiety, anger, jealousy, sadness, disgust, shame, frustration, confusion, guilt, hatred, and despair," which are "thought to be unhelpful and best avoided".

Research Objectives and Significance

This paper aims to clarify situations in which the phenomenon of pretending to understand occurs, and the emotions experienced as a result, through a survey of international students enrolled as undergraduates at Japanese universities. It examines and discusses whether said students experience Foster's (1998) "sense of belonging" and "feeling

of achievement" through "pretending to understand." The theoretical contribution of this research lies in extending understanding of communication strategies and language anxiety specifically within the Japanese language learning context, addressing a significant gap in literature given the absence of prior research directly examining the phenomenon of pretending to understand among Japanese language learners.

RESEARCH METHOD

The author implemented a survey from late 2020 to spring 2023, investigating language-related anxiety in daily life and the act of pretending to understand among international students in Japan. The survey targeted 142 undergraduate international students at Japanese universities. The average Japanese language level of these international students was between N3 and N2 on the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) scale. Over 90% of participants were self-funded students from Asian countries, representing the demographic majority of international undergraduate students in Japan.

The survey method utilized Google Forms, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Questions regarding situations where anxiety about Japanese language use was felt provided multiple-choice options plus "Other (in own words)," while questions regarding emotions (such as "How did you feel after you pretended to understand?") were set as free response only, to enable the students to express their feelings as genuinely as possible without being led by suggested answers. Respondents were asked to answer in Japanese, to enable objective comparison of emotional expressions used.

To avoid having international students negatively evaluate themselves at the outset for "pretending to understand," this survey was careful in question design to ask not "whether" students "pretend to understand," but about "when" they do so. This methodological choice was made to create a non-judgmental research environment and encourage honest reporting of experiences.

Data Analysis

As an analysis method for survey responses, text mining using KH Coder software was implemented, focusing primarily on free responses regarding emotions experienced when "pretending to understand." KH Coder is a free software for quantitative content analysis and text mining, widely used for analyzing Japanese language textual data. The software enables extraction of frequently appearing words, co-occurrence network analysis, and identification of characteristic vocabulary within text segments.

The analysis focused on identifying: (1) situations in which pretending to understand most frequently occurs, (2) reasons for engaging in this behavior, and (3) emotional responses experienced. For emotional responses, particular attention was paid to categorizing vocabulary as expressing positive emotions (such as belonging, achievement) versus negative emotions (such as worry, embarrassment and anxiety).

Extracted words were categorized by part of speech, with specific focus on verbal nouns (with the Japanese construction n+*suru*), adjectival nouns, and adjectives expressing emotions. Frequency counts were conducted to identify the most common emotional expressions, and any case of multiple use of the same word by a respondent was counted as a single response, to ensure that the reported frequency of each word equated to the number of respondents using it. Qualitative analysis of context ensured accurate interpretation of emotional valence.

DISCUSSION

Situations in Which International Students feel Anxiety

When asked about situations in which they feel anxiety related to using Japanese, the most frequent response was "hospital" (85 respondents, 59.9%). "When talking with customers at part-time job" (71 respondents, 52.4%) and "at city/ward office" (63 respondents, 44.4%) were also each selected by around half the respondents (Table 1).

In "other" free responses, three international students mentioned "situations speaking with those who are my social superiors" (in Japanese "*me ue no hito*") as a general principle.

Since, for international students in Japan, most conversational situations including engaging with teachers/administrators at university, part-time jobs, visits to municipal offices, and hospitals, presumably involve engagement with people they are expected to consider "social superiors" in some form, it can be assumed that, on an almost daily basis, many face anxiety leading to the practice of pretending to understand. The situations in which respondents report anxiety are ones in which they are likely to be seeking either important information, or income to sustain their livelihood. Such a clear increase in anxiety experienced during such situations must also be considered to increase the probability of pretending to understand.

	Japanese classes	Other classes	Dealing with university office	Speaking to Japanese classmates	At p-t job, speaking with customers	At p-t job, speaking with coworker	On public transport	When shopping	When at a clinic/ hospital	When at the city/ ward office
Students (n=142)	43 (30.3%)	31 (21.8%)	31 (21.8%)	43 (30.1%)	71 (52.4%)	40 (28.2%)	26 (18.3%)	24 (16.9%)	85 (59.9%)	63 (44.4%)

Table 1. Situtations in which International Students feel Anxiety about Speaking Japanese (n=142)

Circumstances of Pretending to Understand

International students shared their remembered experiences of pretending to understand through free responses. KH Coder analysis revealed frequent situations to include "part-time job (*arubaito*)" (33 times), "class" (9 times), "university" (6 times), "bank" (5 times), and "hospital" (3 times). Counterparts included "Japanese person" (15 times), "teacher" (12 times), "manager at part-time job" (9 times), "friend" (8 times), and "customer" (5 times). Representative responses included students pretending to understand in class when everyone else understood, fearing embarrassment from asking teachers, or at part-time jobs, worrying that repeated clarification requests would anger their customers or managers.

When asked about reasons for pretending to understand during the reported incident (multiple choice/multiple response), the most frequent response was "Because I thought

requesting explanation would interfere with the conversation" (57 respondents, 40.1%), followed by "Because I felt it would inconvenience the other person or others present to request an explanation" (51 respondents, 35.9%), "Because I generally understood the flow of conversation and didn't think it necessary to understand the unclear parts at that time" (49 respondents, 34.5%), and "Because there was no time to request an explanation" (46 respondents, 32.4%). Free responses included "Because I thought if I said I didn't understand, I wouldn't be included in later conversations" and "Because I didn't want to have a long conversation about it at the time."

Emotional Consequences of Pretending to Understand

In order to verify Foster's (1998) proposed results of pretending to understand ("[it] brings the happy bonus of allowing a student whose understanding is incomplete, and whose contribution is limited, nevertheless to feel part of an English-speaking group, with the attendant feeling of achievement" (p.19)), this survey included a free-response question asking international students "How did you feel when pretending to understand?" Analysis of international student responses using KH Coder allowed the conclusion that not a single respondent attained a "sense of belonging" or "feeling of achievement" from pretending to understand.

The extracted word list from KH Coder showed that the top 35 most frequently appearing vocabulary items contained no words connecting to positive emotions such as "sense of belonging" or "a feeling of achievement." Conversely, many vocabulary items considered to express negative emotions were observed: (in order of frequency) "embarrassed (*hazukashii*)" (20 times), "anxious (*fuan*)" (15 times), "worry (*shimpai*)" (10 times), "unpleasant (*iya*)" (6 times), "nervousness (*kinchō*)" (4 times), "afraid (*kowai*)" (4 times), and "unskilled (*heta*)" (4 times), among others.

Additionally, "study (*benkyo*)" appeared 5 times, but all contexts indicated "insufficient study" with comments such as "I felt as though I still can't speak Japanese, or I need to study more," "Even though I studied properly in Vietnam, why don't I understand now I have come

to Japan? I felt my ability was still low," "The frustration was great that even though I'm studying this much, I can't actually keep up with conversations" and "I felt like I still haven't studied Japanese sufficiently". These responses reveal that international students are made to feel guilt regarding their language abilities by their own act of pretending to understand.

Furthermore, "confidence" was used 5 times in answers, but all in negative contexts: "It was painful. I lost confidence in my Japanese ability and gradually didn't want to speak," "I lost confidence," "I have no confidence. It's lonely and embarrassing," "I have no confidence," and "I think I was overconfident." While "ability" appeared 3 times other than in references to confidence, all 3 occurrences were negative: "I felt my ability was still low," "I thought it was my own insufficient ability," and "I feel depressed and strongly think my Japanese ability is still inadequate." Thus, even vocabulary items that are not particularly negative when viewed as individual words are used in context by respondents to convey guilty feelings. A further example of this is that variants of the Japanese word for "good (*yoi/ii*)" were used a total of 15 times, but 12 of these incidences were comparative (using "better") and in statements of regret, as in "It would have been better [~*sureba yokatta*] if I had (asked what they meant/studied harder/admitted I didn't understand". It is possible to envision scenarios in which perceptions of insufficient studying and/or ability, and regret in regard to not asking for clarification or admitting they had not understood, may stimulate students into what Oxford (1999, p.60) refers to as "helpful" or "facilitating" anxiety, promoting further effort to learn, although even Oxford concludes that "the jury is still out concerning the existence of helpful anxiety" (1999, p.61). As this study concluded with asking subjects to report the immediate aftermath of their experience of pretending to understand, further research will be required in order to establish the extent to which students may be positively stimulated to improve their language ability as a result of any frustration or loss of confidence they experience in such cases.

Analysis of *suru*-verbs (verbal nouns), adjectival nouns and adjectives used to describe respondents' feelings when pretending to understand revealed that responses were dominated by words clearly connected to negative emotions (Table 2). The most frequently

appearing vocabulary items in each category ("worry," "anxious," "embarrassed" respectively) expressed negative feelings. Further analysis showed that 43.4% of nouns, 81.3% of adjectival nouns, and 70.6% of adjectives used in international students' answers were negative in meaning. The proportion of negative adjectives rises to 86.3% if the aforementioned statements of regret using "better (*yoi/ii*)" are included in the data set.

The survey responses, in which students predominantly reported negative feelings - "worried," "anxious," "embarrassed" - clearly demonstrate that Foster's (1998) claim about a "sense of belonging" and "feeling of achievement" does not apply to most learners currently studying Japanese in Japan. While some comments suggest that an illusion of belonging to a group can be achieved through "pretending to understand," fear of exclusion underlies them (e.g., "if I said I didn't understand, I wouldn't be included in conversations thereafter").

Verbal Nouns (n + *suru*)		**Adjectival Nouns**		**Adjectives**	
worry (*shimpai*)	10	anxious (*fuan*)	15	embarrassed (*hazukashii*)	20
explanation (*setsumei*)	7	unpleasant (*iya*)	6	good (*yoi/ii*)	15
study (*benkyō*)	5	unskilled (*heta*)	4	bad (*warui*)	13
nervousness (*kinchō*)	4	important (*daiji*)	3	afraid (*kowai*)	4
understanding (*rikai*)	4	obstruction (*jama*)	2	low (*hikui*)	3
heart pounding (*dokidoki*)	2	normal (*futsū*)	2	sad (*kanashii*)	3
meaning (*imi*)	2	nuisance (*meiwaku*)	2	frustrated (*kuyashii*)	2
regret (*kōkai*)	2	very poor at (*hetakuso*)	1	fun (*tanoshii*)	1
lack (*fusoku*)	2	regrettable (*zannen*)	1	strong (*tsuyoi*)	1
response (*henji*)	2	rude (*shitsurei*)	1	lonely (*sabishii*)	1
talk (*hanashi*)	2	detailed (*shōsai*)	1	detailed (*kuwashii*)	1
request (*onegai*)	1	good at (*jōzū*)	1	painful (*tsurai*)	1
pretense (*furi*)	1	precious (*taisetsu*)	1	big/large (ōkii)	1
conversation (*kaiwa*)	1	tough (*taihen*)	1	bothersome (*mendokusai*)	1
question (*shitsumon*)	1	appropriate (*tekitō*)	1	kind (*yasashii*)	1
lesson (*jugyō*)	1	stupid (*baka*)	1		
inner feelings (*shinchu*)	1	complicated (*fukuzatsu*)	1		
life/living (*seikatsu*)	1	ignorant (*muchi*)	1		
response (*taiō*)	1	useless (*muda*)	1		
interruption (*chūdan*)	1	bothersome (*mendō*)	1		
agreement (*nattoku*)	1	ambiguous (*aimai*)	1		
remorse (*hansei*)	1				
Total	53	Total	48	Total	68
Total negative	23	Total negative	39	Total Negative	48
% negative	**43.4%**	**% negative**	**81.3%**	**% negative**	**70.6%**

Table 2. Verbal Nouns, Adjectival Nouns and Adjectives used by International Students to Describe their Feelings after Pretending to Understand (negative words highlighted)

Emotional Consequences of Pretending to Understand

The fact that Foster's (1998) study subjects were international students studying English in America may have contributed to her findings. The contrast between her results and those of the present study reveals important differences in learning environments and social contexts. The Japanese context, in which hierarchical relationships and social harmony are emphasized (particularly to those immigrating to the country), may create specific pressures that amplify the negative emotional consequences of pretending to understand.

As Ozaki (2001, p. 88) suggests, the results of this survey confirm that avoidance of clarification requests is clearly related to the Japanese learner's social status. The hierarchical relationships between international students and their Japanese interlocutors fundamentally shape both the occurrence and emotional impact of pretending to understand. As self-funded students from Asian countries, over 90% of participants occupy a structurally subordinate social position in most daily interactions—as students with professors and administrators, as employees with managers and customers at part-time jobs, and as foreign residents navigating institutional contexts (hospitals and municipal offices). This study accounts for these power asymmetries by examining the specific contexts where pretending to understand occurs and by analyzing students' own articulations of why they engage in this behavior, which frequently reference concerns about inconveniencing superiors, fear of negative evaluation by authority figures, and awareness of their position vis-à-vis Japanese interlocutors. The emotional consequences documented—particularly guilt, shame, and loss of confidence—reflect not merely linguistic difficulty but the psychological burden of navigating communication in contexts where power imbalances constrain perceived behavioral alternatives.

The findings align with Terui's (2012) identification of factors such as protecting self-esteem and responding to social pressure. However, the present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that rather than simply protecting self-esteem, pretending to understand in the Japanese context often results in additional damage to self-esteem, as

evidenced by repeated references to lost confidence and self-perceived insufficient language ability.

Educational Implications

The survey's findings have significant implications for Japanese language education. The high frequency of pretending to understand in critical life situations (hospitals, municipal offices, part-time jobs) suggests that current pedagogical approaches may be insufficient in preparing students for real-world communication challenges. The emotional toll documented in this study indicates a need for explicit instruction in clarification request strategies and creation of learning environments where such requests are normalized and encouraged.

The social dimension of pretending to understand identified in this study points to the need for educators to address power dynamics in Japanese social contexts. Students need support in navigating hierarchical relationships and understanding that appropriate clarification requests are not face-threatening acts but rather demonstrate engagement and respect for accurate communication.

Furthermore, the finding that pretending to understand occurs frequently in part-time job contexts (33 mentions) highlights the intersection of language learning with economic survival for international students. This suggests a need for specialized workplace communication curricula and potentially for workplace education initiatives to help Japanese employers better support international student employees.

The potential for pretending to understand to motivate subsequent learning effort suggests that educators might productively frame these experiences not as failures but as learning opportunities. By acknowledging the inevitability of communication breakdowns and providing strategies for post-hoc clarification and self-study, educators may help students transform negative experiences into productive learning catalysts.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the phenomenon of pretending to understand among international undergraduate students studying Japanese in Japan, examining the circumstances in which this behavior occurs, and the emotional consequences experienced. Through survey research with 142 participants and text mining analysis using KH Coder, several significant findings emerged.

First, pretending to understand occurs most frequently in situations involving social superiors and in contexts critical to students' daily lives, including part-time jobs (33 mentions), classrooms (43 mentions for Japanese classes, 31 for other classes), hospitals (85 mentions), and municipal offices (63 mentions). The primary reasons cited include not wanting to interfere with conversation flow (40.1%), feeling that it would inconvenience interlocutors (35.9%), and time constraints (32.4%).

Second, contrary to Foster's (1998) findings that pretending to understand provides sense of belonging and feeling of achievement, this study found that international students studying Japanese experience predominantly negative emotions. Analysis revealed that 43.4% of verbal nouns, 81.3% of adjectival nouns, and 70.6% of adjectives used to describe feelings were negative, with the most frequent terms being "embarrassed," "anxiety," and "worry." No instances of reported sense of belonging or achievement were observed.

Third, the findings support conceptualizing pretending to understand as an expression of language anxiety, particularly in the form of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. The emotional consequences align with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, suggesting potential impediment to language acquisition. Prior research (Oxford, 1999) suggests that negative experiences may motivate increased learning effort in certain cases, and a small number of comments by students in this survey indicate an understanding of the need to work harder at language studies, although such comments represented less than 10% of responses.

Fourth, the social position of international students as self-funded Asian students in hierarchical Japanese contexts significantly influences the frequency and emotional impact

of "pretending to understand." The pervasiveness of interactions with "social superiors (*me ue no hito*)" creates daily situations where students feel compelled to pretend that they understand, despite in fact experiencing comprehension difficulties.

The study extends existing literature by providing the first systematic investigation of pretending to understand among Japanese language learners, revealing important contextual differences from studies of English learners. The findings underscore the need for Japanese language educators to develop greater awareness of this phenomenon and its emotional toll on learners.

Practical Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge for Japanese language education. First, explicit instruction in clarification request strategies should be integrated into curricula, with emphasis on appropriate language for various social contexts.

Second, classroom environments should normalize clarification requests rather than positioning them as interruptions or signs of weakness. Educators can reduce the perceived pressure to pretend to understand while respecting Japanese politeness conventions by explicitly reframing clarification requests as a culturally appropriate communication behavior. Rather than positioning clarification as interruption or imposition, instruction should emphasize that appropriate clarification requests (e.g., using hedged forms like *mō ichido onegai shimasu* or *sumimasen, yoku wakaranakatta no desu ga*) demonstrate engagement and respect for the speaker by ensuring accurate understanding. Classroom interaction norms can be redesigned to normalize clarification through structured activities in which requesting clarification is the expected and rewarded behavior, and through instructor modeling that demonstrates clarification requests as part of competent communication rather than linguistic inadequacy. Creating low-stakes opportunities for practice—such as pair work where both partners must ask at least one clarification question, or role-plays specifically focused on polite clarification strategies—can help students

develop both the linguistic tools and the confidence to request clarification without perceiving it as face-threatening.

Third, specialized curricula addressing workplace communication for international students warrant development. There is a range of available texts addressing "business Japanese" and workplace behavior for international students who leave education and enter full-time into the corporate workplace; there are, however, significantly fewer teaching resources focused on language and communication for the part-time jobs held by a large majority of international students in Japan. Situation-specific language teaching materials could address some of the anxiety felt by students when interacting with customers and superiors in such situations.

Fourth, educators could help students reframe pretending to understand experiences as learning opportunities rather than failures, providing strategies for post-hoc clarification and self-directed follow-up study.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, all participants were undergraduate students at approximately N2 proficiency level; experiences may differ for graduate students or learners at other proficiency levels.

Second, the study's reliance on self-reported survey data and text-mining analysis using KH Coder, while enabling systematic analysis of emotional vocabulary, has inherent limitations in capturing the full complexity of emotional experiences. Self-reported data is subject to recall bias and may not fully reflect the nuanced, context-dependent nature of emotions experienced in real-time communication situations; this would be true in subjects' first languages and it must be acknowledged to be even truer when acquiring data from subjects in their second (or third or fourth) languages. Text mining identifies frequency and patterns of emotional vocabulary but cannot capture the intensity of feelings or the subtle interplay of multiple emotions that may occur simultaneously. Future research employing methods such as diary studies (in the subjects' first language) with near-immediate

reporting, stimulated recall interviews, or observation of authentic interactions would provide richer insight into the emotional dynamics of pretending to understand as they unfold in actual communicative contexts.

Third, the study captured emotional responses retrospectively rather than in the moment of pretending to understand, leading to a potential for recall bias.

Future research should investigate pretending to understand across different proficiency levels and student populations. Longitudinal studies could examine whether the phenomenon and its emotional consequences change as language proficiency develops. Comparative studies across different target language contexts could clarify which aspects of the findings are specific to Japanese language learning versus general to second language acquisition. Finally, intervention studies testing pedagogical approaches to addressing pretending to understand would provide valuable practical guidance for educators.

The goal of this research is not to eliminate pretending to understand as a communication strategy - indeed, even native speakers employ similar strategies when appropriate. Rather, the goal is to raise awareness among Japanese language education professionals of the negative emotional impact this phenomenon currently has on international students, and to develop educational approaches that minimize unnecessary instances of pretending to understand while helping students productively manage inevitable communication breakdowns. As Japan's international student population continues to grow, understanding and addressing the communicative and emotional challenges they face becomes increasingly critical to successful language education and social integration.

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