

# Reassessing Clarification Request Strategies within English-Speaking Japanese Business Discourse: Clarification of Message Delivery and Pragmatic Ambiguity

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**Objectives:** English communication skills are becoming more important in the business context of Japan. To realise smooth communication, the use of clarification requests is considered facilitative. Many companies in Japan have introduced corporate in-house English training as a part of their English-speaking Human Resources development, and many focus on training in the use of clarification requests. However, not much has been understood about how the pragmatics are employed within the English-speaking discourse community by Japanese businesspeople. This study looks at how clarification requests are used by Japanese businesspeople and addresses how they can contribute to realising effective communication in English-speaking business discourse in Japan.

**Methods:** The researcher analyses data retrieved from stimulated role-play. The participants are requested to engage in collective decision-making in their corporate in-house English training. There were 24 participants involved in this study, and they were placed into four teams for cross-sectional comparison. The interaction of the participants was videorecorded and later transcribed to allow for text-based discourse analysis.

**Results:** Our data show that the use of clarification request strategies was observed in all teams. Participants used clarification requests for various kinds of discourse pragmatic functions.

**Conclusions:** It was concluded that teaching clarification request strategies is beneficial for many Japanese businesspeople who wish to develop their English communication competence. However, the potential face-threatening aspect of the use of clarification requests by Japanese speakers of English has been overlooked. This aspect should be taken into consideration when designing/implementing corporate in-house English training in Japanese companies in the future.

**Key Words:** Clarification Request Strategies, A Stimulated Role-Play, Qualitative Discourse Analysis, Corporate In-House English Training, Englishization

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## Introduction

Clarity is an indispensable aspect of the realisation of effective information delivery. Successful communicators often request clarification when they face difficulty understanding others' utterances. In this study, term *clarification* is consistently employed by following the definition by Kääntä and Kasper (2018) to refer to the sequential group pragmatics, between speakers

and hearers, with which interactants seek mutual understanding in group communication activities (p. 208). Many researchers of business communication investigate how clarification request strategies are utilised in the context of business communication. For example, Nakatani (2017) categorised several types of communication strategies that can contribute to success in business presentation, including clarification requests. It is reported that the use of clarification request strategies plays a facilitative role in realising effective communication in the discourse of business interaction (Nakatani, 2010).

The Japanese language, the author's first language (L1), is often considered typical as a language of a high context culture. The speakers of Japanese frequently depend on an indirect means of message delivery in order to communicate their ideas (Pizziconi, 2009). This preference toward indirect communication requires the listeners to carefully interpret the speakers' intentions. In this situation, requesting clarification can be viewed as potentially face-threatening in that it may possibly impose some extra communication burden on speakers.

However, due to the recent rapid globalisation and its subsequent cultural diversification, the sociolinguistic aspects of Japanese communication are subject to gradual change. Besides, in order to catch up with the global competition, many Japanese companies are eager to introduce global Human Resources (HR) development strategies, including corporate in-house English training programmes (Sato, 2014; Tanaka, 2003, 2006). With the increase of English-speaking HR in many Japanese companies, the in-house communication norms are also expected to change, especially with regard to the clarity of message-delivery. So far, much has been discussed about emerging English-speaking business discourse in the context of Japan (Fujio, 2008; Tanaka, 2006), yet little has been understood about how Japanese businesspeople use English in actual business discourse, let alone their practical use of clarification requests while speaking in English.

In this light, the author attempts to investigate how Japanese businesspeople use English as their second language (L2) in English-speaking discourse in a democratic business meeting, not an autocratic one, and how they deal with clarification request strategies in the discourse where collective decision-making should be made. Through this qualitative investigation, the author will provide some insights into how clarification request strategies can be utilised by Japanese L2 English speakers in the context of business.

## Theoretical Framework

### Discourse of Englishnization in Japanese Companies

A nationwide survey commissioned by Recruit in 2012 revealed

that 77.4% of Japanese companies are eager to introduce some corporate training system to foster their employees' English communication competence, including intercultural business communication skills. In 2013, Rakuten, the largest Japanese online retailer, implemented an English-mandate policy and popularised the term *Englishnization* in doing so. English-mandate policy in the context of Japan is said to be categorised into two types; (1) result type and (2) preparatory type (Norisada, 2012). The former type refers to the situation where employees must use English to practically operate in business as a result of the increase in number of foreign employees, whereas the latter refers to where policy-makers encourage employees to improve their English skills to maintain future English-speaking business infrastructure. It is reported that most Japanese companies implement the preparatory type, and many investigated the reality of this type of Englishnization hitherto (Mikitani, 2012; Neeley, 2011; Sato, 2013; Takamori, 2018).

In the context of Englishnization, employees are not always asked to acquire the English proficiency that meets the L1 standard. Rather, they are encouraged to use English as a business lingua franca, or Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF). In BELF discipline, L2 speakers are identified not as learners, but as independent communicators who use English in their own right (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005). As Handford (2010) explained, what contributes to success in business communication is "not the language ability, but the skills and experience to dynamically manoeuvre within the communities of practice" (p. 145). There are reportedly many kinds of communication strategies that can help realise the dynamic manoeuvre. From among many strategies, clarification requests are considered indispensable in that they contribute to avoiding potential miscommunication (Ghariblaki & Poorahmadi, 2017; Kääntä & Kasper, 2018). Although the concept of BELF is appreciated when it comes to determining language management policy in many such contexts (Sato, 2015; Takamori, 2015), a consensus about how to define and assess success in the BELF-speaking communication context in Japan has not been fully achieved yet.

In light of this, this study looks at the context of Englishnization where Japanese employees are being trained to improve their English communication skills, and investigates the efficacy of training the employees to use clarification requests to improve their practical English competence.

### Clarification Requests within Listener-Oriented Communication of Japanese

Many applied linguists agree that issues related to language use, especially in the sphere of L2 communication, should desirably be analysed multidimensionally to profoundly understand the

essence. Firth and Wagner (1997), in this light, emphasised the importance of incorporating extrinsic discourse data, both speakers' and hearer's points of view, into their analysis when looking at the communication of L2 speakers. In the context of Japanese communication research, Fujio and Tanaka (2012) insisted that Japanese communication be considered with a strong focus on its listener orientation; listeners generally have more power to inform communication discourse than speakers. Thus, it is suggested that Japanese communication be analysed multidimensionally while the discourse, linguistic specificity of its language culture is taken into consideration (Hamaguchi, Kumon, & Mildred, 1985, Nakane, 2007; Tanaka & Fujio, 2011).

Hence, Du-Babcock and Tanaka (2013) compared the pragmatic differences in communication patterns occurring during a stimulated role-play video conference between business professionals in Hong Kong and in Japan. The result revealed that the Hong Kong participants often exhibited their opinions in an assertive manner, whereas the Japanese counterparts preferred reactive pragmatic styles when stating their opinions for the purpose of eventual collective decision-making. As regards the Japanese L2 English pragmatics, the researchers mentioned that the influence of the high context culture of the Japanese language arguably cannot be overlooked (Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2010 for more information). For further investigation, Sato (2018) employed a similar approach to the above study and then identified that Japanese speakers have a tendency to rely significantly on co-constructed pragmatics to engage in collective decision-making. Besides, the data revealed that senior members normally took the initiative during meetings, especially those with a higher status in an organization's hierarchical strata. Meanwhile, it should also be noted that, when disagreement occurred, the junior members often contributed to the co-construction of pragmatics not as disagreement givers, but as receivers by utilising clarification request strategies as sequential group pragmatics. It was also indicated that the use of clarification requests in this democratic decision-making context also facilitates discussion in a multidimensional way. However, this nature of multidimensional pragmatic functions of clarification request in collective decision-making by Japanese speakers of L2 English remains to be fully understood. Hence, in this study, the following three research questions have been established to further understanding in relation to the use of clarification request strategies in business meeting discourse.

- RQ1: How can clarification request strategies be utilised in collective decision-making discourse?
- RQ2: How do Japanese participants recognise and handle a clarification request, as sequential group pragmatics between speakers and hearers, in English-speaking

business (role-play) discourse?

- RQ3: What are the pedagogical implications of the above research findings?

## Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach to discourse analysis (please note that this discourse study was originally conducted as the author's Ph.D. dissertation research project). The author chose a Tokyo-based engineering company as the research site of this study. The author was involved in this company as an L2 English communication consultant to help them foster necessary business English communication skills. As the training participants, employees in their mid-30s and 20s (mostly engineers and sales representatives) were chosen as they were supposed to play leading roles for further globalisation of the company.

As a part of corporate in-house training, the training participants ( $n = 24$ ) were asked to do a stimulated role-play to engage in collective decision-making to decide on a teleworking candidate. They were asked to produce a mock meeting of up to 45 minutes, since this duration is the average length of any brain-storming meeting in their company. In the mock meeting, the participants were asked to demonstrate their L2 English communication with the presence of an L1-English speaking supervisor. The participants were classified into four teams according to their English proficiency, each consisting of five to six trainees. During the stimulated conversation, the participants demonstrated several L2 English pragmatic patterns that were found to be influenced by Japanese, the participants' mutual L1.

There were four types of participants involved; (1) engineers in their mid 30s (Type E-1), (2) sales reps in their mid 30s (Type S-1), (3) engineers in their 20s (Type E-2), and (4) sales reps in their 20s (Type S-2). The author's longitudinal involvement in this company suggested, as is often the case with Japanese engineering companies, engineers tend to have a higher status than sales reps because of the traditional organisational culture. Employing these four types of participants in stimulated role-play meetings lends itself to observing a wide variety of pragmatic L2 English patterns, which allows for discourse analysis from a multitude of angles.

The stimulated role-play activities that the participants engaged in were videorecorded and then later transcribed in order to allow for text-based discourse analysis. The transcription procedures followed the conventional format based on Firth (1995), as shown in Figure 1. Given the exploratory nature of this qualitative study, the author does not wish to go as far as to generalise the research findings. Rather, this study aims to gen-

(2.0)	silence with the length of time
(.)	short pause which lasts less than 0.5 seconds
((nodding))	paralinguistic element
::	extended vowel
=	latching
.	falling intonation
?	raising intonation
(...)	inaudible
[A]	speech overlap
[B]	

**Figure 1.** Transcription convention based on Firth (1995). Adapted from “The discourse of negotiation: Studies of language in the workplace” by Firth, 1995. Copyright 1995 by Pergamon. Reprinted with permission.

erate some hypotheses that deserve further exploration. In the subsequent section, tables are presented that depict the distributions of the pragmatic pattern observed.

## Results

Table 1 describes the overall distributions of the pragmatic patterns used by the participants based on the transcribed data. To ease reference, the participants’ names are shown based on their characteristics (from Type E1 to S2 as was described above). Their TOEIC® scores are shown to help roughly understand their English proficiency level. Additionally, the number of turn-taking, word per minute rate, and their respective teams are shown. Finally, the pragmatic patterns each participant used are shown in terms of simple numerical measures. This study focuses on the participants’ use of clarification request pragmatics, but other types of pragmatics are also shown for readers to be able to compare.

Table 1 revealed that the majority of the participants utilised clarification request strategies during the stimulated meetings, particularly at the beginning of meetings where participants tried to understand each other’s opinions by asking for clarification. Regarding other types of pragmatics, readers may notice there are significantly many 0 counts. Due to this relatively small size, the data set has not experienced any further statistical data analysis yet. In the following section, four relevant excerpts (one excerpt from each team) will be considered to conduct qualitative analyses on how clarification requests were manifested in the discourse. For each excerpt, line numbers and speaker names are shown to ease reference.

The following excerpt, Excerpt 1, depicts the situation where S1-3 was requesting clarification from S2-3 who explained why he chose Bob Summers as his candidate, not Dorothy Lovell.

In line 1.1, S2-3 was trying to explain why he chose his

teleworking candidate. It has to be noted that hesitation and pauses were observed in his speech. In the follow-up interview, he commented while referring to his repeated hesitation and pauses that he felt very nervous while stating his opinion then. In the following line 1.2, S1-3 requested clarification (“Idea is important?”) about what S2-3’s main point in the previous line was. S2-3 in no time responded by stating “Yes.” In line 1.4, S1-3 further tried to clarify S2-3’s main message “Face to face? Very important?” To that, S2-3 (line 1.5) again answered by saying “Yes” immediately. The author’s participant observation in this discourse suggested that S2-3 was not normally a quick reaction-giver, as was shown in this excerpt. Hence, the author noticed that his quick response in this excerpt was considered noteworthy.

I interpreted this quick reaction of S2-3 as a sign showing he was nervous, or face-threatened, during the interaction. During their follow-up interviews, they both commented that they felt slightly nervous while interacting in this scene. This psychological uneasiness resulted from clarification between them (e.g., “Idea is important?” by S1-3 and clear “Yes” by S2-3.) S2-3 even said in the interview that “*I wanted to answer clearly*” indicating that he needed some extra effort to proceed with this discussion. Besides, repeated clarification in Japanese meeting discourse, where pragmatic ambiguity is sometimes deemed facilitative in communication (Fujio, 2004; Itani, 1995), apparently led them to feel mutually face-threatened by each other’s attitude. S1-3’s nodding followed by indicating to move forward “So” in line 1.6 indicated that he finally felt his want for clarification was fulfilled.

I also interviewed S1-3 about his nodding in line 1.6, and he commented that he felt slightly nervous during the interaction, but he finally felt relieved by noticing that they eventually reached agreement. On the other hand, he said he sensed the rest of the group also experienced a nervous atmosphere. He even took a risk by proceeding with this discussion because he thought requesting clarification was necessary. He commented that “*as a result, my opinion turned out to be the same as his, which is good, though*” suggesting that the face-threatening atmosphere during the meeting resulting accidentally from his own clarification request had the potential to contribute to communication conflict in the group.

The following excerpt, Excerpt 2, also depicts a similar situation with a clarifying-responding pattern.

In line 2.1, S2-6 asked a question about how telework should be defined here, having others think about how effective the potential working environment could be with no face-to-face communication. Then, he suddenly said “Why do you choose Dorothy Lovell?” with which he intended to request nothing more than a clarification of the reason as he mentioned in the

**Table 1.** Overall distributions of the pragmatic patterns used by participants

Participant	TOIEC®	Turn	WPM	Team	Disagree	Receive	Clarification	Consensus
E1-2	750	8	114.95	1	2	0	0	0
E1-3	575	34	104.46	2	2	5	7	1
E1-4	715	15	108.93	3	18	9	3	0
E1-5	750	65	145.51	4	14	15	8	0
S1-3	790	13	105.73	1	3	1	14	1
S1-4	790	34	115.89	2	8	1	8	2
S1-5	600	14	95.8	3	1	8	1	0
S1-6	630	44	124.19	3	1	4	2	2
S1-7	645	24	104.3	3	0	0	2	0
S1-8	760	58	127.37	4	15	20	9	0
S1-9	800	14	106.15	4	9	13	12	1
E2-2	650	5	115.21	1	0	2	2	0
E2-3	620	50	79.64	1	0	1	6	0
E2-4	630	13	99.9	2	0	0	3	0
E2-5	700	14	82.66	3	9	6	0	0
E2-6	750	9	147.84	4	6	0	2	1
E2-7	860	61	125.63	4	3	2	2	0
S2-2	650	2	103.43	1	0	0	0	0
S2-3	765	5	95.33	1	0	0	2	0
S2-4	630	3	88.78	2	0	0	4	0
S2-5	620	8	67.33	2	0	0	1	0
S2-6	615	3	90.85	2	0	0	2	0
S2-7	750	1	115.19	3	0	0	0	0
S2-8	720	9	87.66	4	4	0	3	0

Note. TOIEC®, Test of English for International Communication; WPM, word per minute; Disagree, showing disagreement; Receive, receiving disagreement by means of back-channeling; Clarification, clarification request; Consensus, consensus achievement utterance.

**Excerpt 1.** S1-3 was requesting clarification from S2-3

- 1.1 S2-3: A: I think? a: I a we cho we should choose Bob Summers (.) e: because e: his work e: seems to be hard (.) to change e:: (.) traditional work to teleworking (.) e: but he has a (.) idea e: to change. ((coughing)) And (.) Dorothy Lovell is a: Dorothy Lovell's work (.) seems to be hard (.) too. She had no idea (.) to change a: to change e: this work to tele (.) working. So (.) I think Bob Summers is the best (.) to choose.
- 1.2 S1-3: Excuse me? A: I I (.) Idea (.) is important? Idea's discussion is important?=  
 1.3 S2-3: =Yes  
 1.4 S1-3: Face to face? Very important?=  
 1.5 S2-3: =Yes.  
 1.6 S1-3: ((nodding)) So.

follow-up interview. At the same time, he looked at S2-4 to signal who he was talking to. S1-4, in line 2.2, tried to clarify if S2-6 was actually talking to S2-4. To that, S2-6 immediately

responded in the following line. It should also be noted that both S1-4's and S2-6's conversation ended with inauthentic laughter indicating they felt nervous during the discussion,

**Excerpt 2.** A similar situation with a clarifying-responding pattern

- 2.1 S2-6: m:: So I think u: te telework a: e: (.) I think a: telework means? so without face to face communication? A: so (.) she? a: a: Dorothy needs face to face communication? (.) Why do you choose Dorothy Lovell? ((looking at S2-4))
- 2.2 S1-4: S2-4? ((laugh))=
- 2.3 S2-6: =S2-4. ((laugh)) (7.0)
- 2.4 S2-4: U:: I think u: e: (3.0) a: (1.0) u: (.) the way of working is u: a: can (.) can exchange (.) to telework is u: u: important. But the: a:: (4.0) the most important things is to help u: a: (4.0) help u: (.) situation and the: or enviro environment u: about u: u: people? who who has problem. So a: (1.0) e: it is happy to manage to a: manage a: it's happy to select? the way of working (.) if u: it is convenience e: (.) for for the people? e: has problem. Anything. (3.0)

most possibly due to the face-threatening nature of requesting clarification here in this discourse. After 7.0 seconds, a markedly long silence, S2-4 started to explain his idea. I interpreted the insertion of this long silence here as an indication of a nervous atmosphere.

I interviewed S2-6 about how he felt about the nervous atmosphere in this situation because of an indirect clarification request directed toward S2-4. To that, he responded that he did it for the purpose of “*communicating and sharing ideas*” mainly between him and S2-4. Nevertheless, S2-4 was obviously reserved in terms of communication attitude as the 7.0-second silence indicated. However, it should also be noted that he provided his opinion.

I also conducted a follow-up interview with S2-4 about this silence, and he responded that he sensed some face-threatening atmosphere along with his responding to the clarification request. His statement in line 2.4 was markedly long compared with the utterances of the other participants. He stated “*I wonder if I could lead this discussion by myself, or like that?*” suggesting that he felt uncomfortable taking the initiative in this discussion, though he realised that he needed that long utterance in order to meet the clarification request he was given.

The following two excerpts, unlike the first two, describe situations where participants were requested to clarify how they understood contextual information.

In this excerpt, Excerpt 3, S1-7 was trying to check whether his understanding about the candidates’ current situation was correct in the middle of discussion. S1-7, in line 3.3, cut in and addressed his concerns about the appropriateness of his understanding (“I confused” and “They are same company already? No?”). This counts as a type of clarification request in that he intended to clarify if other participants in this discourse had the same understanding as he did. The 2.0-second silence after S1-7’s statements

must belong to the situation; it was not merely his pause. Having this silence here indicates that the members of this discourse community might have sensed a nervous situation along with his clarification request. To that, S1-5 (line 3.4) responded “I think the same company.” E1-4 immediately responded by means of laughter to signal he agreed with S1-5, rather than clearly stating his opinion (line 3.5). Afterward, in line 3.6, S1-6 also agreed with them. In line 3.7 that follows, S1-7 showed his surprise (“A really?”) with inauthentic nervous laughter, and responded “OK OK” to signal that he understood the situation. In line 3.8, group laughter and a 4.0-second silence occurred, which signalled that the face-threatening atmosphere along with S1-7’s request was defused. This group recognition was further confirmed in the subsequent stimulated recall interview.

My interview with these participants suggested that some of them were not sure of their understanding of the discussion topics; S1-7 was not the only one who misunderstood the given context. S1-5 also commented that he was not sure if his understanding was correct. S1-7’s clarification strategy this time apparently resulted in achieving group consensus. His laughter in line 3.7 represented his embarrassment according to the follow-up interview. The subsequent group laughter indicates that the nervous atmosphere in the situation along with S1-7’s clarification request was defused as a result of consensus-achievement about how to understand the teleworking candidate’s current situation.

The misjudgement of the candidates’ background information also happened in the following group. In this situation, the use of clarification requests facilitated subsequent effective interaction.

This excerpt, Excerpt 4, depicts the situation where S1-9 pointed out E1-5’s misunderstanding about the situation in an indirect manner. In line 4.2, E1-5 said “A:” indicating that he acknowl-

**Excerpt 3.** S1-7 was trying to check whether his understanding was correct

- 3.1 S1-6: =Yes.  
 3.2 E1-4: ((nodding))  
 3.3 S1-7: Sorry please u (.) please tell me. A: I confused.  
 So: (.) the are they a: same same company already? (.) no? (2.0)  
 3.4 S1-5: M: I I think same company.=  
 3.5 E1-4: =((laugh))=  
 3.6 S1-6: =Yeah.  
 3.7 S1-7: A really? ((laugh)) OK OK.  
 3.8 All: ((group laugh)) (4.0)

**Excerpt 4.** Use of clarification requests facilitated subsequent effective interaction

- 4.1 S1-9: uh-huh  
 4.2 E1-5: =A:=  
 4.3 S2-8: =m maybe (.) you you wasted [(...)]  
 4.4 S1-8: [Basically]  
 you [cannot] change this registration.  
 4.5 S1-9: [((laugh))]  
 4.6 E1-5: Sorry firstly I (.) misunderstood ((laugh))  
 [this (.) situation]  
 4.7 S1-9: [((laugh))]  
 4.8 E1-5: But a: I now I (.) understand the so: (.) where's where is good condition this u: ((picking up  
 his paper and pointing at it)). But a: I (.) still a: I my opinion a: is still same.  
 4.9 S1-9: [Oh]  
 4.10 S1-8: [Oh] No no no change? ((laugh))=  
 4.11 S2-8: =I (.) agree with you.  
 4.12 S1-9: Okay.

edged his misunderstanding. S2-8 in line 4.3 said “you wasted” showing his reluctance to notice that E1-5’s choice was based on his incorrect understanding. According to my follow-up interview, his reluctance in this situation resulted because E1-5 was the only one who had the same idea as S2-8, and if E1-5 had changed his opinion, S2-8 would have been in the minority in terms of the choice of candidate. In the following line, S1-8 tried to persuade them that these conditions would be unnegotiable. E1-5 being his potential competitor in this meeting in terms of seniority, S1-8 must be expecting that E1-5’s acknowledgement of his own misunderstanding could eventually diminish his momentum in this discourse. S1-9, who happens to be the facilitator, also felt the tension in this situation as he stated during the follow-up interview while referring to his nervous laughter in line 4.7.

In line 4.8, contrary to S1-8’s expectation, E1-5 succeeded with continuing his utterance by delivering his apology. Then, he still declared that he would still choose Dorothy. His bizarre syntax in this line indicates that he must have experienced some psychological insecurity. In lines 4.9 and 4.10, S1-9 and S1-8 simultaneously said “Oh” that signalled their surprise. S1-8 even requested clarification “No no no change?” to make sure E1-5 really meant to go with his choice. In line 4.11, S2-8 expressed his agreement with E1-5’s statement. My follow-up interview revealed that S2-8 stated he was afraid of losing his only comrade when E1-5 acknowledged his misunderstanding of the context. Besides, he even commented that he felt so relieved when he noticed that E1-5 did not change his opinion. E1-5’s consistency helped prevent S2-8 from making an accidental trajectory into

the minority in this discourse community. His quick reaction immediately after E1-5's declaration not to change his opinion suggests that he wanted to back up E1-5 to encourage him to go with his original candidate choice.

On the other hand, E1-5 stated in his interview that sharing his (mis)understanding with others helped him deepen his understanding about the given context. As was indicated by Excerpt 3, he may not be the only one in this group that misunderstood this contextual information. Although some clarification request strategies can potentially increase the risk of face-threatening in discourse, if used effectively, they can also help realise smooth communication. In the follow-up interview, S1-8 also praised E1-5's strategic manoeuvre in this discourse by saying "*he really is good*". These discourse data suggest that the use of clarification request strategies can help not only the individual, but also other participants reach proper understanding about contextual information leading to the creation of better rapport among participants.

Based on the above data analyses, I will provide the answers to the established research questions.

1. While many of the Japanese participants of this study appreciated pragmatic ambiguity, using clarification requests can contribute to creating common ground, based on which the participants can proceed with their collective decision-making in a harmonious manner. The use of clarification requests at the beginning of brain-storming meeting will potentially facilitate interaction while possibly preventing misinterpretation of contextual understanding.

2. A clarification request appears to be face-threatening to many Japanese participants of English business discourse who often value pragmatic ambiguity when proceeding with collective decision-making. At the same time, when incorrect understanding occurs, a clarification request, sometimes along with self-sacrifice, can contribute to defusing a nervous atmosphere that may exist during discussion. The desirable use of clarification requests as sequential group pragmatics can help participants achieve a consensus in democratic English-speaking business meeting settings.

3. To facilitate communication, using clarification requests is often considered effective (e.g., Nakatani, 2010, 2017). However, obviously, the L1 model of English communication still remains predominant when it comes to business English in-house training in Japan (Sato, 2014). However, the data analysis suggested that Japanese speakers would sometimes hesitate to use the strategy, based on the L1 standard, due to their mindset to rely on ambiguous pragmatics for collective decision-making. Hence, simply urging the trainees to accept the L1 standard business English communication does not help improve their communication attitude. This aspect should be taken into fur-

ther consideration when designing and developing corporate in-house English training in the future.

## Discussion

In general, clarification request strategies, particularly in business communication discourse, are viewed as a pragmatic discourse device to assure understanding through negotiation of meaning. Unlike other pragmatic patterns observed in the author's previous projects (Sato, 2020), clarification requests were used by all four types of participants, though there were some exceptional participants. The use of clarification requests is considered effective and frequently suggested in order to improve L2 English speakers' communication (Ghariblaki & Poorahmadi, 2017; Kääntä & Kasper, 2018). Nevertheless, the data analyses suggest that Japanese meeting participants will probably feel nervous, or sometimes even face-threatened, when a clarification request occurs during English-speaking discourse. This is largely because some Japanese participants highly appreciate pragmatic ambiguity especially when engaging in collective decision-making, as was indicated by Nakane (2007). Requesting clarification, though some Japanese find it very facilitative, could also be deemed risky within the mindset of the participants, as Excerpts 1 and 2 indicated.

Excerpt 2 also showed that responding to a clarification request sometimes requires careful rapport management. In line 2.6, S2-4 stated his opinion with redundant hesitations, pause and even long silence. This pragmatic pattern is found to be similar to that of disagreement as was illustrated in the author's previous studies (Sato, 2018, 2020). This finding suggests that S2-4 apparently felt face-threatened when responding to the clarification request from his senior colleague. His follow-up interview comments also suggested that he was under pressure to take the initiative in this discourse. This analysis suggests that the action of clarification request in Japanese English-speaking discourse can be potentially face-threatening, and this aspect has to be taken into consideration when designing and implementing corporate in-house English training to foster employee English communication skills in business.

Excerpts 3 and 4 both suggested that clarification requests as a part of group pragmatics could be beneficial in that they help others better understand the given contextual information. In Excerpt 3, S1-7 requested clarification from his teammates about how he should understand the telework candidates' current status. In a sense, S1-7 sacrificed himself to request clarification to create necessary common ground, based on which he could proceed with collective decision-making. E1-5's case in Excerpt 4 is the same in that he misunderstood the background



information on the one hand. But on the other, it is also different from S1-7's case in that E1-5 received a euphemistic clarification request about his understanding from others, triggering his eventual recognition that his understanding about the given context was incorrect. However, E1-5 quickly and successfully retrieved his momentum and continued his statement. E1-5 survived the clarification requests from others that functioned as a means of indirect disagreement and thus were face-threatening to E1-5. To that pragmatic manoeuvre by E1-5, S1-8, his strongest competitor in this discourse community, even provided commendation by saying "he really is good" (p. 9). This kind of effective reaction to a potential face-threatening clarification request should be incorporated into future training curricula to help Japanese businesspeople acquire some necessary communication strategies.

## Conclusion

This study looked at discourse where Japanese participants ( $n = 24$ ) used English as their L2 and engaged in collective decision-making in business. The author observed that many reference books of business English communication used in conventional corporate in-house English training programmes recommend teaching clarification request strategies for effective communication and information delivery. The use of clarification requests was found beneficial for many Japanese businesspeople who wish to develop their English communication competence. However, the said communication strategies have a potential face-threatening aspect for Japanese speakers of English who often appreciate some ambiguous pragmatics for collective decision-making. This sociopsychological aspect has not been fully taken into consideration when designing, developing and implementing corporate in-house English training to foster employee business English competence. This insight can also be considered beneficial for non-Japanese business professionals who wish to work with Japanese L2 English speakers effectively.

Finally, I would like to address some potential limitations of this research. First of all, this study is qualitative and thus exploratory in nature. Due to the exploratory nature of this research design, the research findings of this study can by no means be generalised at this stage. Though the implications of this study can benefit potential readers from other Asian high-context countries due to some mindset similarities, readers should also think about their research context very carefully before starting to think about the applicability of this research. Second, the discourse data set presented in this study was retrieved through a stimulated role-play activity. Du-Babcock and Tanaka (2017) acknowledged that this data collection is

legitimate enough as an alternative approach since overcoming traditional exclusivity of business context to obtain authentic discourse data is fatally challenging. However, it should also be noted that in authentic business discourse some different pragmatic patterns could possibly emerge. Researchers are advised to tackle this issue very eagerly to help realise legitimate and effective research approaches in the future.

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