Offering opinions in tag-like questions in authentic conversation in English and Japanese

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how English tag questions and Japanese tag-like questions work when offering an opinion in natural conversation. Conversation can be defined as a talking event in which participants exchange a report of an event, or facts and opinions that they think will interest their partner. A tag question is an English question form while tag-like questions are a Japanese question form that have a function equivalent to the English tag question. A tag-like question in Japanese requires some response from other participants and uses a particular sentence-final particle such as '[declarative sentence]+*desho*.'

Video-taped English and Japanese conversations were analyzed for this research. The video is 12 hours in length and the data were selected from the First Encounter Corpus (FEC) collected by a project team (research fund code (c) 22520595). It was found that tag questions are used to offer opinions in both languages. However, while Japanese native speakers used more tag-like question forms than English speakers, English native speakers tend to offer their opinion in declarative form. It is suggested that further research should be conducted on opinion in an intercultural setting, where English is a lingua franca.

1 Introduction

This study is a part of a larger project on cross-cultural pragmatics that involves conducting comparisons among the three varieties of Inner Circle English with Japanese, and is supported and funded by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) [Research fund code (c) 22520595]. As one part of the project, this paper focuses on tag questions in English conversation and tag-like questions in Japanese conversation when these question forms are used to offer opinions. We call the Japanese form a 'tag-like question,' because English and Japanese have different syntax and are not equivalent in form; however, they do share similar functions. Tag questions and tag-like questions are types of polar question that convey negative or positive orientation (Tsui, 1992). In the next section, the relationship between tag and tag-like questions and the opinion-offering act will be introduced. The next section describes the methodology used. Finally, the results of quantitative analysis using a corpus-based approach and qualitative analysis will be shown. Finally, the answer to the research question and its application to English education will be discussed.

2 Literature Review: Offering opinions and tag-like questions

Opinion is usually arrived at on the basis of observation and judgment (Leech & Svartvik, 2002). In terms of offering opinion, a Japanese policy statement from MEXT in 2002 "to cultivate 'Japanese with English abilities' includes the following:

> With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English […]. At present, though, the English-speaking abilities of a large percentage of the population are inadequate, and this imposes restrictions on exchanges with foreigners and creates occasions when the ideas and opinions of Japanese people are not appropriately evaluated. However, it is not possible to state that Japanese people have sufficient ability to express their opinions based on a firm grasp of their own language. (www.mext.go.jp, cited in Byram, 2008, p. 45).

This statement is the basis for a major revision of the teaching of English and can be comprehended in two ways: One is that Japanese people cannot express their opinion in English; the other is that Japanese people express their opinion or do not have their own opinion. Therefore, learning English may improve this behavior because speaking English requires competence in critical thinking. Policy statement of from 2002 Japanese policy statement from 2002:Mextstated. MEXT's concern is that an act of opinion offering is affected by sociocultural background. They assess that Japanese people do not have their own opinions. The English national curriculum states that language teaching "provides opportunities to promote […] moral development, through helping pupils formulate and express opinions in the target language" (Byrem, 2008, p. 36). MEXT repeated this worry that Japanese people cannot express themselves in their mother tongue in 2003 when they stated, "It is also necessary for Japanese to develop their ability to clearly express their own opinions" (Byrem, 2008, p. 45). The government put emphasis on "ability to communicate Japanese perspective,

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ideas and opinions."

There are various forms used to offer opinions. The most typical form may be an expression that starts with "I think…" or "I don't think…." This expression explicitly shows that the utterance contains the speaker's subjective opinion. Other expressions, such as "In my opinion, it's a good idea," "As far as I'm concerned, I'm not interested," and "To my mind, it's a good idea" also explicitly offer opinions. Another form used to offer opinions is the tag question. A question is a semantic class that is primarily used to seek information on a specific point (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 804). However, tag questions differ from other question forms. According to Tsui (1992), tag questions require an explicit response of a confirmation or disconfirmation from the addressee. They also expect agreement from the addressee. Tsui claims that, in terms of communicative choice, a speaker requires agreement or disagreement with the speaker's assumption. Husdon (1975) also noted that tag questions are always conductive because they cannot be neutral. They always require the addressee to confirm the speaker's assumption. Tag questions suggest that the speaker has certain assumptions and is biased towards a certain answer. The preceding part of the speaker's proposition includes either a "fact" or the "speaker's opinions." This paper focuses on the function of offering opinions. The analysis targets appraisal of the preceding part of the speaker's sentence that expresses personal feelings, and judgment. Such parts might, for example, express social sanctions, social esteem, and opinions (Martin and Rose, 2003).

The Japanese language has very different syntax to English. In terms of the form and function, some sentence-final particles can function as tags. We call the type of sentence that has a preceding proposition with a tag a "tag-like question." These questions are not completely equivalent to English tag questions in terms of form. A tag question in English is a question containing the speaker's opinion in the preceding part of the sentence and a tail part (tag). Tag-like questions are a form in Japanese that have a proposition asserted in the preceding part of the sentence with tag-like sentence-final expressions, such as *janai* and its variants, combined with the sentence-final particles *yo* and *ne* in that order (Hayashi, 2010, p. 2688). According to Hayashi (2010), questions with tag-like endings (*janai, desho, yone*) can be used to offer assessment/opinion while seeking agreement. Adachi (2002) adds '*janaidesuka,*' to the list of tag-like endings, since it suggests a strongly offered opinion while requesting some response from the addressee.

Another feature of tag questions is that they have an involvement function. English tag parts and some sentence-final particles in Japanese serve to solicit listener involvement (Thornbury and Slade, 2006). Therefore, tag questions would function to offer opinions while soliciting confirmation and agreement responses from the listener. They also work to continue a conversation, while serving to build rapport because tag questions and tag-like questions at least require agreement from the other participants in the conversation.
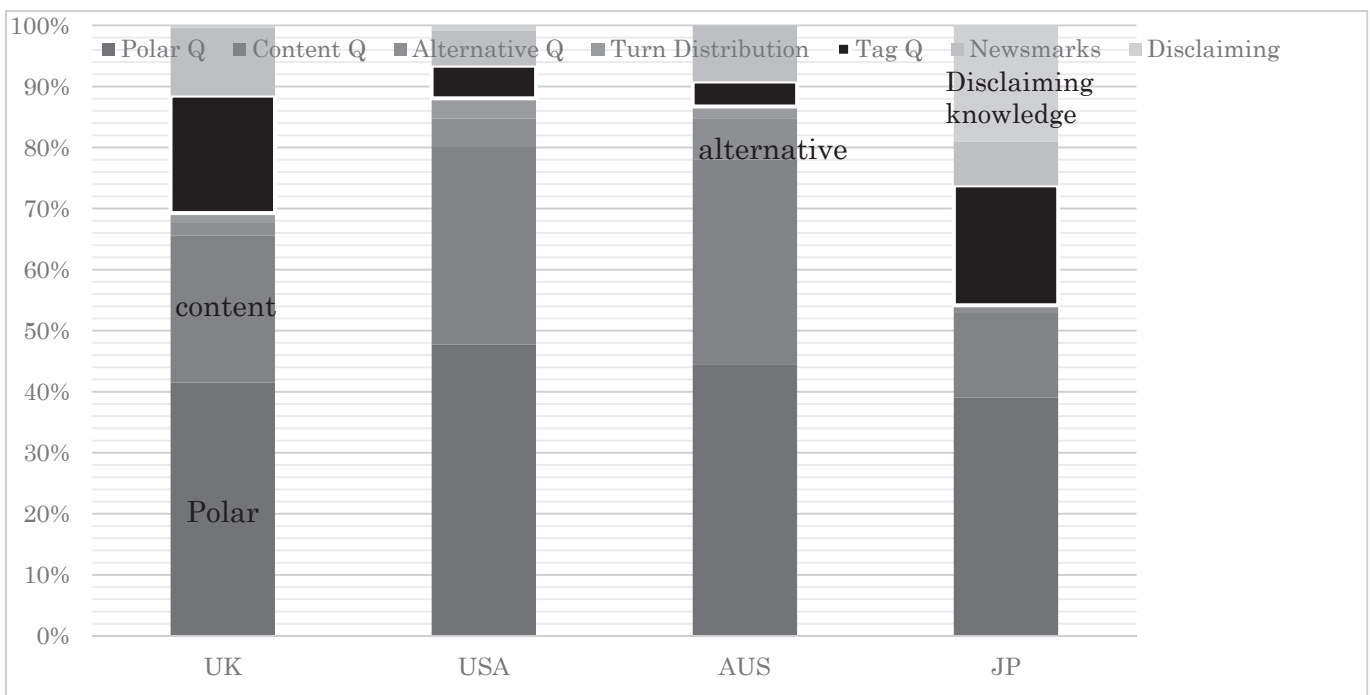

Figure 1. Ratio of question categories in different country groups

Figure 1 has been modified from Shigemitsu (2013). Shigemitsu (2013) analyzed 1234 question-answer sequences in English and Japanese first-encounter communications by males. She divided questions into seven categories: polar questions, content questions, alternative questions, tag questions, newsmarks (e.g., really?), disclaiming knowledge (e.g., I'm not sure), and turn distribution (e.g., What about you? How about you?). All of the categories require some addressee response. The first four question types are form oriented, while the other three are function oriented. The darkest highlight color in Figure 1 shows what ratio of tag questions were used by each country group in the English data and of tag-like questions in the Japanese data. The graph shows that British participants (18.6%) and Japanese participants (19.5%) used a relatively high ratio of tag-like questions compared with American (5.3%) and Australian participants (4.1%). It might be said they offer their opinion in the tag-question form. These research and background assumptions lead to two research questions. To eliminate the syntactic factors of usage, this paper regards tag questions in English and tag-like questions in Japanese as similar question categories.

RQ1: Are tag and tag-like questions used to offer opinions in English and Japanese conversation?

RQ2: Are there any differences in usage between tag and tag-like questions?

2 Methodology

Question-Answer sequences in this paper analyzed the same set of conversational data as used in Shigemitsu (2013) and four sets of intercultural data. The data consists of 24 conversations from throughout the FEC. 80 conversation data to avoid overlap of the participants. The duration of each conversation is approximately 30 minutes. The participants were all males apart from in intercultural conversations in Japanese.

The participants were selected from the data when the utterances have the following conditions and show a social interaction structure. The data analyzed for this paper are the mono-cultural data of English conversation, which were videotaped in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom in 2011. The conversations in Japan were recorded in 2009 and 2012. Each conversation was recorded during a 30-minute first meeting between three male participants. The participants were not assigned any particular topic. They were allowed to talk freely on whatever topic they chose. After the conversation, a follow-up interview was separately conducted with each participant.

All participants met the following criteria:

1. None of the participants had met each other previously. We assumed that the participants tried not to receive a negative evaluation from the other participants.

2. The participants were all men. We examined only men to eliminate gender variables, and because Japanese people who face problems in intercultural communication are generally male businesspeople.

3. The participants were aged 22 and older. Most were PhD and MA students. We assumed the participants of this age group to be socially and culturally mature. Their performance may have been influenced by their sociocultural background.

4. All the participants' ancestral background was checked. They were not recent immigrants.

5. All participants in the study signed a consent form stating that the researchers may use the recording data for academic purposes only and that it was not anticipated that recording would be used in a manner that could cause personal identification.

There was some overlap of participants in the conversational groups; however, no participant took part in more than two groups. From the 20 sets of conversational data, 1234 question forms were identified from the English and Japanese mono-cultural data (five from the United Kingdom, five from the United States, five from Australia, and five from Japan) and from the five sets of Japanese data. With regard to the intercultural data, these were taken from two native and two non-native speakers. Intercultural conversations that took place in English were coded IE and those that took place in Japanese were coded IJ. There were two English and two Japanese speakers who conversed in English in the IE group. The native English speakers in the IE group were American and Canadian. Two English speakers and two Japanese speakers conversed in Japanese in the IJ group. The IJ group is exceptional because it included female participants. IJ8 had one Japanese female participant and IJ9 had one Canadian female participant and two Japanese female participants. To avoid the complexity of factors, this paper will not consider these gender differences in the analysis.

Since this is a first encounter conversation, there are some features that are distinct from ordinary conversation. First, participants introduce themselves at the beginning of the conversation. Then they start to exchange their background information, their likes and dislikes, and a report of facts and opinions that they think will interest their listeners. In the

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introductory conversation, participants try to present their best personality and be polite to others. Since this opportunity will be a long-term relationship they aim to succeed at relationship building. For that reason, the data tends to show the ideal conversation as visualized by participants.

The following conversational features were analyzed: utterances that offer opinions in declarative form: 'I think,' 'I feel,' 'I should,' using a corpus-based approach and tag questions that offer opinions using a corpus-based approach. Tag questions had to include a subjective idea in the precedent part of the utterance. In total, 543 declarative forms of opinion and 208 tag-question forms were obtained from the data.

Mono-cultural data

UK	UK27	UK29	UK30	UK53	UK57	Japan	JP17	JP68	JP71	JP72	JP73
USA	US31	US33	US.36	US.39	US.40						
AUS	AU.41	Au.42	AU.43	AU.47	AU.50						

Intercultural data

Intercultural (English)	IE3	IE75
Intercultural (Japanese)	IJ8	IJ9

Table 1 Data for analysis

4 Analysis

4.1 Quantitative analysis

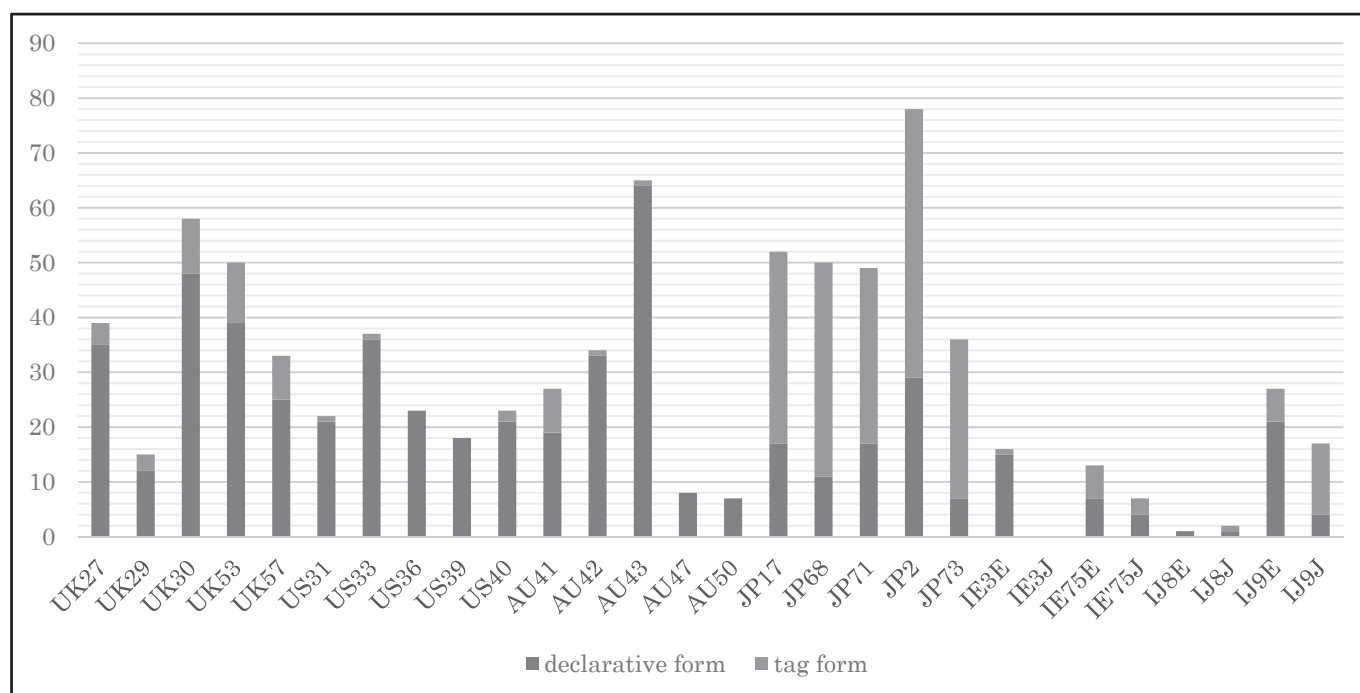Figure 1 shows how often each group exchanged opinions and in what forms they were offered.

Figure 2 Opinion offering in each group

It was found that whether opinions were exchanged or not varied from group to group. Japanese participants used tag-like question forms to offer opinions and that the number of opinions exchanged by participants in an intercultural setting was fewer than in mono-cultural groups.

    Figure 3 and Figure 4 compare how often Inner-circle English speakers and Japanese speakers offer opinions in the participants' own languages. The bottom part of the bar shows opinions in the declarative sentence form and the upper part of the bar shows the opinions in tag-question forms.
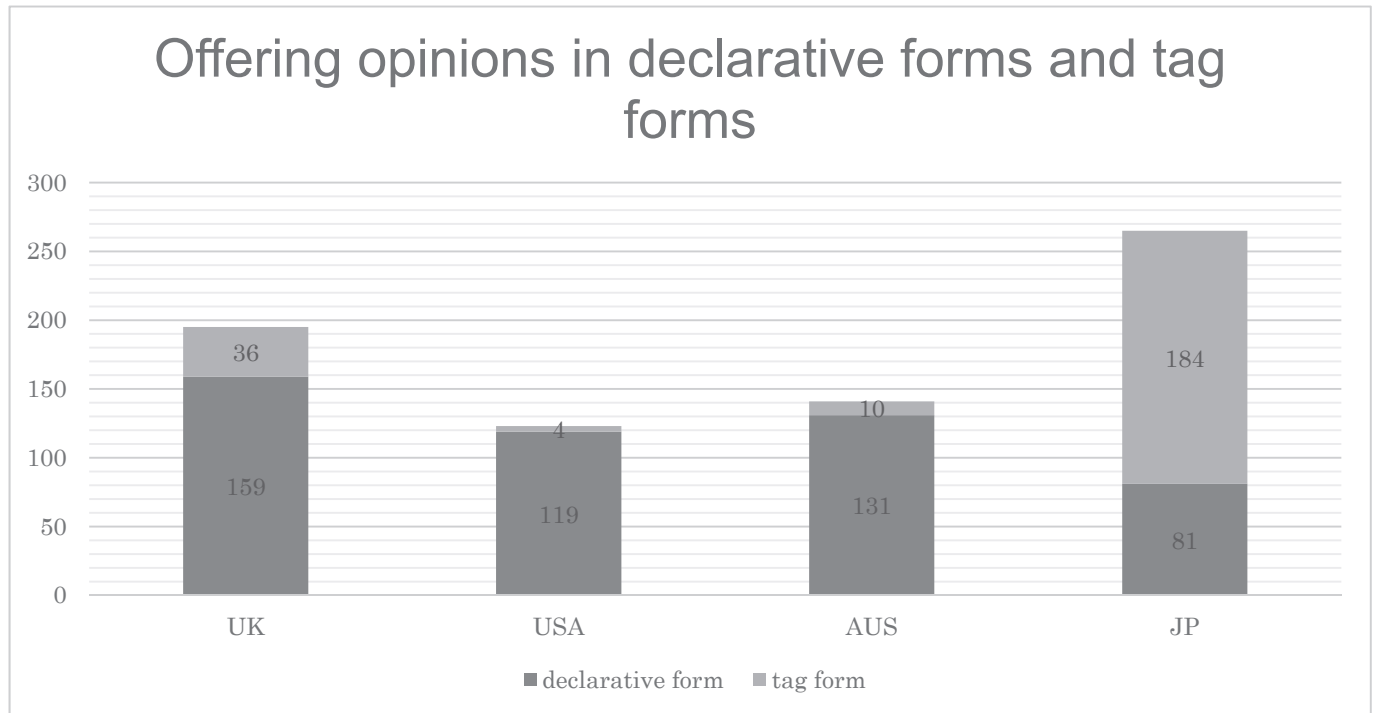

Figure 3. Offering opinions in declarative forms and tag forms (mono-cultural data)
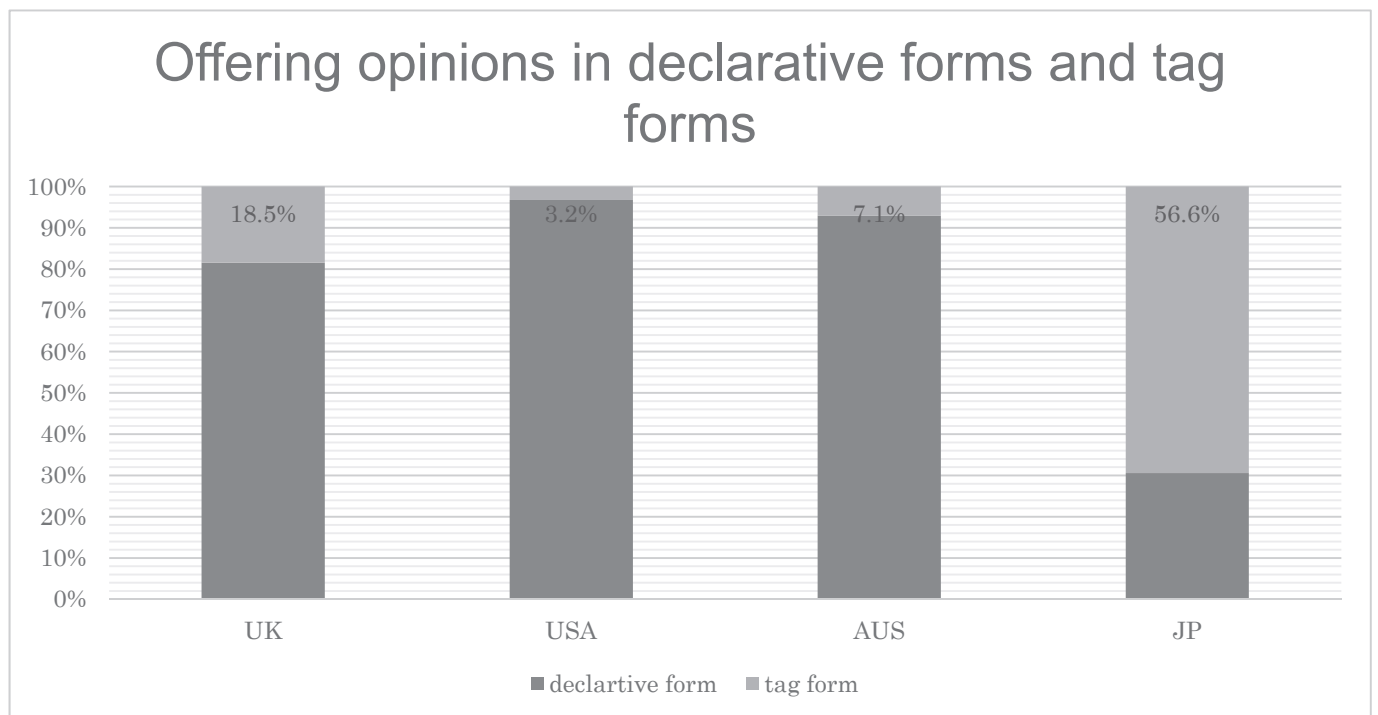

Figure 4. Offering opinions in declarative forms and tag forms in number (mono-cultural data)

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Figure 3 and Figure 4 demonstrate two main findings. The first is that Japanese participants offered opinions more than any other group (UK 195 times, USA 123 times, AUS 141 times, and Japanese 265 times). The second finding is that Japanese participants preferred to use tag-question forms when they offered opinions. However, Japanese participants used more tag forms (56.6%) than the other Inner Circle groups (UK 18.5%, USA 3.2%, AUS 7.1%). This result shows us that Japanese participants heavily depended upon using tag questions when they offered opinions. British participants used tag forms more than the other two Inner Circle English groups, but the tag form was just one of British participants' choices when offering question forms. About 80% of opinions were offered in declarative form by British participants.
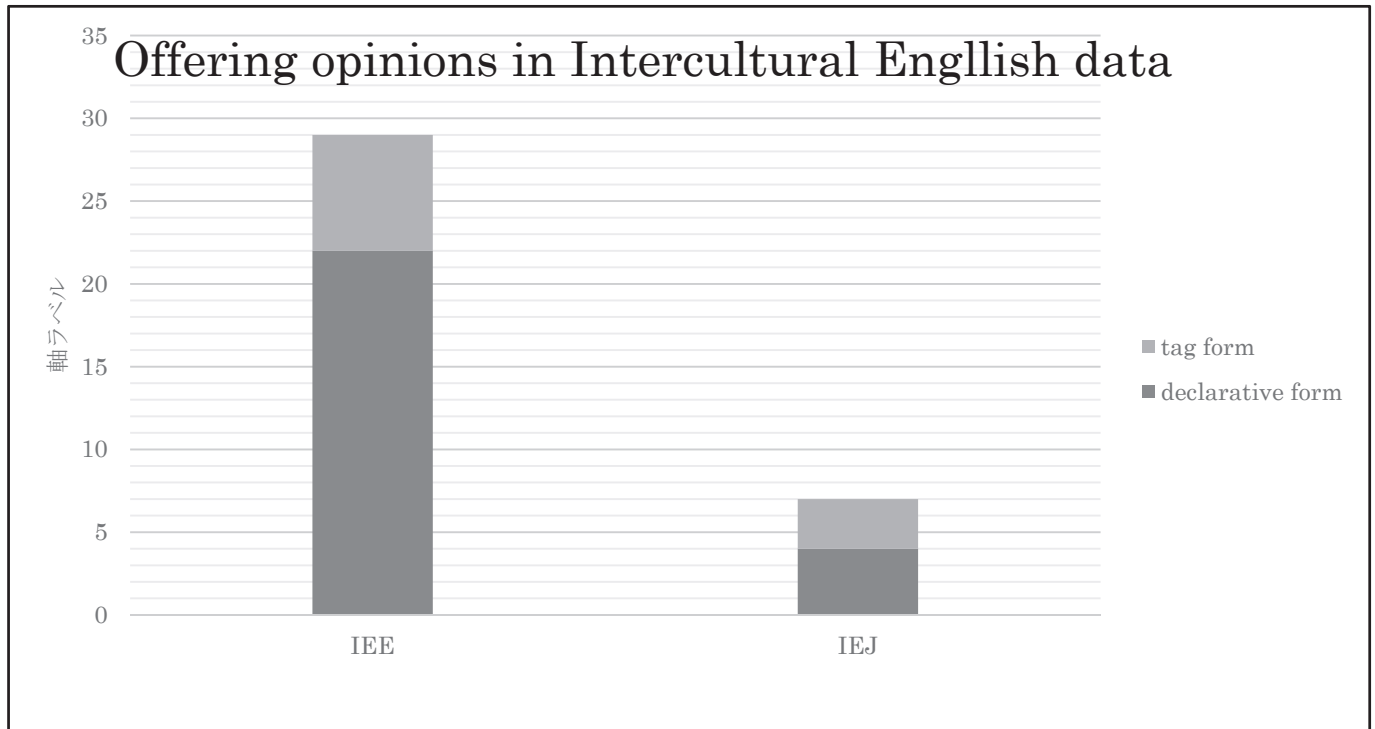

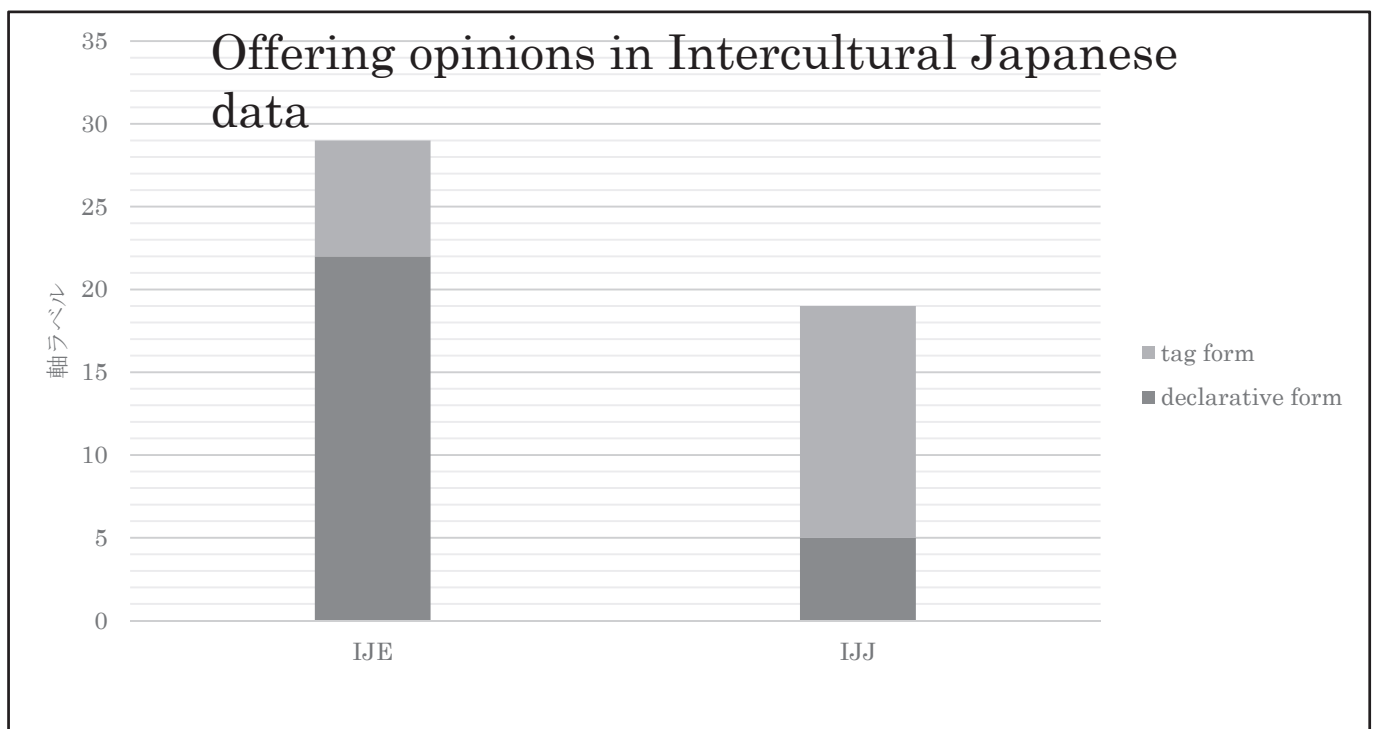Figure 5 Offering opinions in Intercultural English data

Figure 6

Figure 5 shows the intercultural English data. It demonstrates that English speakers (IEE) offer more opinions than Japanese speakers (IEJ). As Figure 6 shows, English speakers offer more opinions even in Japanese conversation. They also use declarative forms more often than other groups. When Japanese people offer opinions, they use tag forms. Figures 5 and 6 show that there is a tendency for English speakers to offer opinions in declarative form whereas Japanese speakers offer opinions in tag form. Japanese participants did not offer opinions in English data due to the language transfer. In their own language, Japanese people prefer to offer opinions in tag forms. They usually avoid using declarative forms to offer opinions in their own language. Therefore, in the English data, their use of declarative forms to offer opinions is very infrequent. Moreover, they do not transfer tag-like questions into tag questions. This may be because they do not categorize tag questions as a tool to offer opinion at the cognitive level.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

This section examines the relationship between tag and tag-like questions and their response. The first excerpt is from the English mono-cultural data. In excerpt (1), participants are discussing the budget of universities in the UK. B5 used a tag question and B4 responded, "well, yeah," overlapping with the last word of line 01 of B5.

(1) [UK 27]
      01 B5 : It'd be hard to push – I agree in principle, these things are very precious, aren't they [too?]
      02 B4:   [Well], yeah, I mean defense is one thing that's been completely [Unclear], ring-fenced, which to me
      03   seems insane when you are [cutting the school's]

In excerpt (2), participants are discussing Clapham, the area where they live. The town was damaged by a German air raid during World War II. They discuss how the city rebuilt the town. In line 03, B22 used a tag-question form to show disagreement with the previous B23 utterance. In line 04, B23 responded, "You are right," and then B23 added an explanation for his utterance in lines 01 and 02. B22 then laughed. After that, in line 04, B23 used a tag-question form to give his perspective. In line 06, B22 offered confirmation in response to the question.

(2) [UK57]
      01 B23: You get that sort of thing a bit around here as well.
      02   I suppose post-war they didn't have the money or
      03 B22: Well, no, when they built in a hurry I suppose, didn't they?
      04 B23: You are right, I mean it's keep thinking it's going to come up.
      05 B22: @@
      04 B23: Seems to manage to avoid it, doesn't it?
      06 B22: Yeah.

In excerpt (3), they are still talking about Clapham. The town was rebuilt very quickly. B22 offered a negative opinion in line 02. The phrase "I think," which co-occurred with his utterance in lines 02-03, can be interpreted as his opinion. B21 gave short feedback to his utterance, "Uhm." In 06, B22 tried to continue his utterance but was interrupted by B21 in line 07. It can be said that B21 does not agree with him completely in line 04. It was, rather, a pseudo-agreement.

(3) [UK57]
      01 (pause)
      02 B22: But Clapham is very narrow, isn't it? The streets are very narrow, and I think, Clapham, Streatham's
      03   got a little bit more room, a little more elbow room
      04 B21: Uhm
      06 B22: but
      07 B21: Maybe, a bit of a diverse erm community as well
      08 B23: Yeah.
      09 B21: Clapham's a little bit like, you know [nods his head upwards to indicate upper class], another like
      10   graduates

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Excerpt (4) is from a Japanese conversation. The translation is provided in parentheses. In 01, a combination of the final particles *yo* and *ne* are used. This combination functions to make a tag-like question. J25 showed agreement with the question. In the tag question, J24 offered his guessing perspective on a particular room.

(4)[JP17]
  01 J24 *dattara kekko hiroi desu <u>yone</u>* (Then, it is probably wide, isn't it?)
  02 J25 *Maa tashika ni* (well, I agree, you are right)

In excerpt (5), *janaideshouka* is used. This is a variation of *janai,* which is a sentence-final particle that functions to make tag-like questions. They are discussing corroborative research work. After introducing themselves, they discovered that they were both in closely related research areas of technology. In line 01, J25 offered his opinion that they would be able to do corroborative research in tag-like questions. To his suggestion, J26 and J24 showed agreement one by one. However, there is a notable pause in line 04, and J25's suggestion was not developed as a topic. Moreover, J26 changed the topic in line 05. It was not clarified whether J24 and J26 agreed with J25's suggestion from here. Affirmative response in lines 02 and 03 could be pseudo-agreement.

(5)[JP17]
  01 J25: *Onnaji nanika dekirun <u>janai deshou ka</u>* (We should do the same area of research, shouldn't we?)
  02 J26: <u>*so so*</u> (Yes yes)
  03 J24: <u>*ee*</u> (yes – polite form)
  04 (pause)
  05 J26: *Hoka no kai no yatsu wa wakannai desukedo ne* @@ (I don't know what are they doing on the different floor, -ne)

Thus, the addressees showed agreement to the tag question and tag-like questions. Even if they do not agree with the proposition in the preceding part of the utterance, the participants in the data offered pseudo-agreement. This adjacency sequence will work for in-group belongingness among the participants and will help to create rapport among the participants.

5 Discussion and conclusion

 It was found that tag questions are used to offer opinions in both languages. Japanese native speakers used more tag-like question forms than the English speakers. The tag form works for avoiding explicit conflict among the participants because it requires affirmative responses. MEXT states that Japanese people are not capable of expressing their opinion in their own language, but the data do not confirm this assertion.

 However, English native speakers tend to offer their opinion in declarative form. This is a more specific way to show that the content of an utterance is the opinion of the speaker. Tag questions, on the other hand, are an indirect form of offering opinion and require affirmative responses meaning that the speaker would not like to engage in any argument on the topic. However, it is suggested that opinions should be offered in an intercultural setting, where English is the lingua franca. This is because, as offering opinions in tag-question form requires affirmative response and pseudo-agreement, the opinion sounds weak and does not generate argument and conflict, which were essential in the discussion.

 The limitations of this paper suggest the need for future research. The qualitative analysis should be more detailed. How one piece of opinion will be treated in the flow of conversation should also be a research topic. Since the amount of data from an intercultural setting was small, this paper omitted the qualitative analysis of intercultural data. For intercultural setting and intercultural competence, data from intercultural settings should be analyzed in detail in the future and from the results, some suggestions should be presented to foreign language learners.

6 References

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A note on transcription conventions

[UK27] on top of the transcript is the code of the conversation data of First Encounter Corpus.

@@ indicates laughing. The number of marks shows the duration of laughing.

[   ] in the transcript shows overlapping of different speakers.