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Language, Culture, and Choice: An Investigation of Topic Selection among Japanese University Students in Academic Presentation Courses

言語・文化・選択：日本人大学生のアカデミックプレゼンテーション科目
におけるトピック選択の調査

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Japanese university students choose topics for academic presentations in English-medium courses. Using a simple mixed-methods design, this research conducted a survey of Japanese undergraduates (n=21) and a follow-up semi-structured interviews with the same group. The analysis focuses on the ways linguistic confidence, cultural background, course expectations, and personal interest interact when students narrow down a presentation topic. The results indicate that students' decisions are influenced by a combination of cultural familiarity, language difficulty, and a preference for topics that feel socially "safe" within a Japanese classroom atmosphere. Many students described that some of their concerns include choosing their own interest over more globally oriented topics, dilemma about speaking in English, and getting too much attention from peers. Across interviews, students repeatedly highlighted two factors: the desire to challenge themselves academically and the need to feel comfortable presenting in English. Cultural expectations related to group harmony and public perception were frequently mentioned as factors shaping their final choices. The findings suggest that instructors can better support students by offering structured guidance on selecting topics, adjusting linguistic demands, and creating a classroom atmosphere where trying new topics does not feel scary or uncomfortable. This research contributes to the growing body of work on intercultural communication and strategies for foreign language teaching in Japan.

Keywords: topic selection, presentation skills, cultural identity, intercultural communication

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In recent years, Japanese university students have become increasingly involved in academic presentations conducted in English, particularly within English-medium instruction (EMI) and foreign language programs. This shift corresponds with national and institutional efforts to internationalize higher education and strengthen students' global competencies (Galloway et al. 2020: 397). Research has documented how EMI environments influence students' language development, academic participation, and confidence (Rose et al. 2021: 173). However, one foundational aspect of presentation work on how students select their presentation topics,

has received little empirical attention. Topic selection plays a crucial role in shaping student participation, communication skills, and cultural identity. This topic remains further exploration within Japanese higher education. Given the complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and motivational factors influencing students' choices, a closer investigation into this process is both timely and necessary (Jiang & Papi 2022: 25). Topic selection represents more than a pragmatic classroom task. It constitutes a venue where students negotiate various concerns: between Japanese cultural identity and perceived global academic expectations, and between individual expression and group harmony (Galloway et al. 2020: 399).

Understanding this process requires attention to several dimensions. First, the linguistic dimension: students must select topics they can discuss in a non-native language, creating tension between interests and communicative competence (Jiang & Papi, 2022: 26). Second, the cultural dimension: Japanese cultural values emphasizing social harmony may shape topic preferences differently than Western academic cultures that encourage individual preferences and originality (Vitta & Al-Hoorie, 2020: 1273). Third, the personal identity dimension: topic choice reflects how students position themselves, as Japanese learners or emerging international students, as culturally focused or globally oriented. Fourth, the motivational dimension: factors such as teacher feedback, peer expectations, and academic relevance influence topic selection (Shibata, 2021:592).

While extensive research examines Japanese students' language anxiety, presentation skills, and motivation, limited research work specifically investigates how they select topics and why particular factors drive their choices. Most studies focus on skill-building rather than the processes that undergo topic selection. This study addresses this gap through mixed methods integrating quantitative patterns with qualitative insights from the students' interview responses.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Research Questions

This study looks at how Japanese university students choose topics for their academic presentations in English. This investigates how their choices are affected by language concerns, cultural background, and the type of course they are taking. The study also explores what motivates students to choose certain topics, such as personal interest, course requirements, cultural comfort, or how easy the topic feels in English. In addition, it compares topic-selection patterns in different courses such as the language, linguistics, and literature, to see whether students think differently in each setting. Finally, the study asks how students' choices show the balance they try to keep between Japanese cultural values and wider global or academic expectations.

2.2 Research Objectives

This study has four main goals. First, it aims to identify general patterns in the topics students prefer and to see whether certain student characteristics are related to their choices. Second, it aims to understand why students choose specific topics by using semi-structured interviews

to explore their reasons in more detail. Third, it examines how cultural identity, confidence in English, and course activities work together to influence the topic selection process. Lastly, the study aims to offer practical suggestions for teachers. These suggestions focus on helping instructors support topic choices that respect students' cultural background, encourage motivation, and reduce language-related difficulties in English-language presentation classes.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This mixed methods study integrated quantitative surveys with qualitative semi-structured interviews, analyzed separately then merged during interpretation. The quantitative component identified patterns and frequencies and the qualitative analysis explored meanings and reasoning.

3.2 Participants

Twenty-one Japanese undergraduates (12 female, 9 male) enrolled in presentation courses within two foreign language faculty at two major universities in Osaka. Participants' TOEIC scores ranged from 520-750 (intermediate to advanced proficiency). Purposive sampling ensured representation across course types: Language courses (n=8), Linguistics courses (n=7), Literature courses (n=6).

3.3 Data Collection

Quantitative: A 20-item survey administered early in the semester assessed topic preferences, motivations, perceived difficulty, and course-related factors.

Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews (45-60 minutes each) conducted mid-semester explored topic selection reasoning. Interview guides included questions: *"Why did you choose this particular topic?"*, *"What factors influenced your decision?"*, *"Did you consider other topics?"*, *"How did you balance personal interest with language difficulty?"*

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and conducted in English (participants' choice) or Japanese with translation.

The quantitative data were examined using descriptive statistics, frequencies, and percentages, to show overall patterns in topic preferences across different course types. For the qualitative portion, the interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's six-phase process.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Topic Preferences by Students' Academic Discipline (Courses)

Students selected topics that matched what they felt each class expected from them. Their choices varied based on confidence, interest, and their understanding of the course focus. See Table 1.

Table 1: Topic Preferences by Course Type (Percentage of Students)

Topic Category	Students from Language Courses (n=8)	Students from Linguistics Courses (n=7)	Students from Literature Courses (n=6)	TOTAL (n=21)
Japanese Cultural Topics	75%	86%	67%	76%
English-speaking Culture	38%	14%	33%	29%
Global or Neutral Topics	0%	14%	17%	10%
Linguistics-related Topics	13%	57%	33%	33%
Accessible Language Topics	75%	57%	67%	67%

4.2 Findings: Final Topics for Academic Presentation Class

4.2.1 Students from Language Courses. Students tended to choose topics they felt comfortable explaining in English. Many selected familiar cultural topics or everyday experiences. Examples included explaining the Japanese tea ceremony to foreigners, comparing politeness expressions in English and Japanese, or discussing the idea of *omotenashi* in tourism. Six out of eight students in these courses selected topics that they believed were “easy to talk about” in English.

Topics from students under language courses focus on communicative aspect:

"Japanese tea ceremony and how to teach it to foreigners" (*Language Student 2 representing 75% of language course students chose similarly accessible topics*)

"Differences between Japanese and English politeness systems"

"The Japanese concept of 'omotenashi' [hospitality] in modern tourism"

4.2.2 Students from Linguistics Courses. Students from linguistics courses selected more technical or theory-related topics. Common choices included the differences between the particles *wa* and *ga*, phonological contrasts that affect second-language learning, or the historical development of kanji. More than half of the students chose topics that required some degree of linguistic analysis.

Topics of students from linguistics courses focus on analytical depth:

"Grammatical structures specific to Japanese: the particle 'wa' versus 'ga'" (*Linguistics Student 4, representing 57% choosing linguistically demanding analysis*)

"Phonological differences between Japanese and English affecting L2 acquisition"

"The history of kanji: Chinese influence on Japanese writing"

4.2.3 Students from Literature Courses. Students from literature courses tended to choose culturally rich or interpretive themes. Examples included character analysis in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, comparisons between women's roles in classical Japanese literature and Victorian literature, or aesthetic themes such as *mono no aware*. These choices

reflected the nature of the course, which emphasized interpretation and cultural understanding.

Topics of students from literature courses focus on cultural and aesthetic dimensions:

"The protagonist's internal conflict in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*: Connecting Japanese melancholy (*mono no aware*) to contemporary fiction" (*Literature Student 2*, representing 67% of literature students selecting culturally rich topics)

"Women's images in classical Japanese literature versus Victorian literature"

4.3 Themes from the Interviews

The interviews revealed four recurring themes that shaped how students decided on their topics. Percentages below indicate how many participants mentioned each idea, but they should be taken as general patterns rather than exact measurements.

Theme 1: Cultural Familiarity

Many students (40% or 8 out of 21) chose Japanese cultural topics because these felt familiar and easier to explain. They said that having background knowledge reduced the amount of new content they needed to learn and helped them focus more on speaking English.

"I chose to present about Japanese traditional theater because I already understand [translate:kabuki] from Japanese perspective. I don't need to learn it new like I would with Shakespeare. The content is easier in my mind. I felt I could spend my time practicing the English instead."—Language Student 3

Students expressed that cultural familiarity gave them a sense of security. One literature student explained:

"When I first thought about presenting on American poetry, I felt scared. What if my professor asked me something in English I couldn't answer? But with Japanese poets, I felt confident. I grew up with these poems. Even if I make mistakes speaking English, the ideas are inside me."—Literature Student 2

Some students also pointed out that familiarity made it easier to manage vocabulary gaps:

"Japanese topics feel yasui [easy, comfortable]. I can explain well because I have background knowledge. Even if I don't know every English word, I can explain in different ways or use Japanese words sometimes."—Linguistics Student 4

This quote demonstrates how background knowledge provides strategies (paraphrasing, code-switching) when vocabulary gaps emerge.

Theme 2: Personal Interest Limited by Language Anxiety

Many students (47% or 10 out of 21) described choosing topics they liked, but only within limits they believed their English ability could handle. Several students wanted to choose more challenging academic topics but felt worried about specialized vocabulary.

"I really want to present on climate change and environmental policy, which is my real interest. But I worried... the vocabulary is very difficult, very technical. I chose instead to present on seasonal changes in Japan and how it affects culture. This is easier to explain in English, and still interesting to me, but not my main passion."—Language Student 3

Some expressed concern about their peers' choices as well:

"My friends chose topics they thought were interesting but didn't know much about. I was thinking, 'How will they explain that in English?' So I was conservative. I chose something I understand well and that won't require me to use too much special or technical vocabulary." —Language Student 4

This quote reveals that students actively evaluated both their own anxiety and their peers' choices, developing meta-awareness that personal interest without language confidence could create public performance problems.

Others described physical symptoms of anxiety:

"If I chose an interesting topic but very difficult vocabulary, I would be very nervous during presentation. My heart would beat so fast, and I might forget English words, or worse, stop. So, I chose a topic where I can speak smoothly even if not perfect." —Linguistics Student 6

This quote demonstrates how anxiety about linguistic performance influenced topic selection itself, with students deliberately narrowing choices to reduce anticipated emotional burden.

Theme 3: Understanding of Discipline (Academic Field) Relevance

More than half of the students (57% or 12 out of 21) showed awareness that different academic fields expect different types of topics. They adjusted their choices based on what they believed the professor, or the course valued.

"In the linguistics class, I felt I should choose something analytical, something that shows I understand linguistic theory. If I present about my favorite Japanese word.. wouldn't be academic enough. So, I chose to analyze how the Japanese writing system is a good linguistics topic. It connects to course content."—Linguistics Student 3

This quote demonstrates an understanding that different disciplines value different topics. The student recognized that academic topics need to be "relevant" to their discipline.

Another student explained the demands of a literature course:

"For the literature course, we're supposed to do literary analysis, so I needed to pick something with enough depth. I couldn't just pick any book. It had to be something we could analyze seriously like theme, symbol, character... so I chose The Golden Pavilion because it's famous and my professor mentioned Japanese aesthetics as important." —Literature Student 3

Students also noted differences between course types:

"In communication class, the topic can be anything as long as we speak smoothly and well. But in linguistics, we need to present something more academic." —Linguistics Student 5

This quote shows students internalizing disciplinary expectations, adjusting topic choice to match perceived academic standards.

Theme 4: Balancing Japanese Identity and Global Image

More than half of the students (57% or 12 out of 21) felt caught between their Japanese identity and the idea that "international" topics should come from outside Japan. They

often questioned whether choosing Japanese topics was acceptable in an English-medium environment.

"I wanted to present something about Japanese culture because I am Japanese, but I also thought, 'This is an international university class. Should I choose something more global? Like, is presenting about Japanese topic too narrow-minded? But then I thought, 'No, I can explain wabi-sabi [Japanese aesthetic principle of imperfection] better than anyone, and that's good.'" —Literature Student 4

This quote explicitly shows identity negotiation: initial doubt about whether Japanese cultural focus is appropriate in a globalized academic context, followed by reframing Japanese topic as a legitimate academic contribution.

"I wondered if choosing a Japanese topic would look too local. But then I realized that explaining Japanese ideas in English is also a kind of global communication." —Literature Student 4

Others worried about judgment from classmates:

"In an English class, are we supposed to choose topics about other countries? I wasn't sure. But in the end, I chose something Japanese because it felt more like me." —Language Student 6

Some questioned the assumption that "international" must mean "non-Japanese":

"People say we need to be global, but why does global mean talking about Western things? I can be global by sharing Japanese ideas in English, right?." —Linguistics Student 4

Social Pressure and "Seken". Concerns about how classmates might judge their choice were common. A lot of students (76% or 16 out of 21) often mentioned *seken*—the awareness of how others might view them.

"If everyone chooses Japanese topics and I choose Japanese topic too, maybe that looks like we're avoiding challenge? But if everyone chooses Western topics and I'm the only one with Japanese topic, maybe that looks like I'm being stubborn or not open-minded? I felt nervous when they see my choice." —Language Student 4

"I was worried that other students might think I'm being too Japanese if I only present about Japanese things. In an English class, shouldn't we be learning about English-speaking countries? But I realized I have more to say about Japan. My English is for expressing myself, not erasing myself." —Language Student 6

This powerful quote demonstrates students' deep reflection on whether language learning required cultural assimilation or could serve as a vehicle for cultural expression. The phrase "my English is for expressing myself, not erasing myself" captures the identity issues formed in choosing a topic in the class.

"I was worried that choosing only about Japan might make me seem... not serious? Like I didn't try to choose some global perspectives. There's pressure to show you're interested in other cultures too. But I was also thinking, 'Why should I pretend to be interested in topics I don't care about just to look international?'" —Language Student 5

This quote reveals that students worried both about conformity and about appearing closed-minded or avoiding difficulty. This follows the research conducted by Vita & Al-Hoorie (2020) that Japanese cultural values emphasizing social harmony may shape topic preferences differently than Western academic cultures that encourage individual preferences and originality.

The most prominent theme reflected students' explicit or implicit negotiation of identity when selecting presentation topics. They want to balance Japanese cultural identity with some global image.

5. ANALYSIS: THEMATIC FINDINGS

Analysis showed that the type of course had a meaningful effect on how difficult or analytical the topics were. Students in linguistics courses were noticeably more likely to choose linguistically demanding topics compared to those in other courses. However, course type did not significantly influence whether students chose Japanese or non-Japanese topics as shown in the percentages. Across all courses, most students preferred Japanese cultural themes, suggesting that cultural identity remained central regardless of course focus.

The combined results from the survey and the interviews show that Japanese students choose presentation topics in ways that are connected to their identity, not just their personal likes or dislikes.

Four main points appeared in the data. First, students used their cultural knowledge on purpose. Many chose Japan-related topics because these felt easier to explain in English. Instead of seeing this as a weakness, students used their cultural background to help them manage the language load. Second, language anxiety strongly influenced choices. For many students, fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood mattered more than personal interest. They often avoided difficult topics because they wanted to reduce stress before presenting. This supports the discussion of Jiang & Papi (2022) that students must select topics they can discuss in a non-native language, Japanese language in this research, creating tension between interests and communicative competence (Jiang & Papi, 2022: 26). Third, students showed awareness of disciplinary expectations. Half of the participants said they changed their topic depending on the type of course. They were not passive; they made careful decisions based on what they thought each subject valued. This supports the study of Shibata (2021) that factors such as teacher feedback, peer expectations, and academic relevance influence topic selection. Fourth, topic selection involved identity reflection. More than half of the students questioned whether choosing a Japan-focused topic meant they were staying safe or not being “global enough.” This internal conflict required effort and emotional energy, even though it was rarely discussed openly in class. This topic supports the discussion of Galloway et al (2020) that topic selection constitutes a venue where students negotiate various concerns: between Japanese cultural identity and perceived global academic expectations.

5.1. Teaching Strategy Recommendations for Teachers

Teachers can help students by acknowledging that choosing a topic is connected to who they

are and how they see themselves in an English-learning environment. Discussing these issues openly can help students feel less pressure or shame when choosing culturally familiar topics. *Example question:* “How can you express your own perspective in English while still being true to your identity?”

Provide support for more difficult topics. It is because anxiety limits students’ willingness to try new topics, teachers can offer steps that make harder topics more manageable. This may include teaching key vocabulary in advance, giving background information, or allowing practice presentations.

Value students’ Japanese cultural knowledge. Many students chose Japanese topics because they truly understand them. Teachers can show students that this knowledge is meaningful and academically valid. Presenting Japanese culture in English can be a sophisticated skill, not a simpler choice.

Explain the differences between academic fields. Students benefit from understanding why expectations differ across subjects. For example, linguistics may expect detailed analysis, while communication classes may value fluency and clarity. Making these differences clear can help students make confident and informed topic choices without worrying about choosing incorrectly.

6. CONCLUSION

This study shows that when Japanese university students choose topics for presentations in English, they are doing much more than completing a simple task. Their choices reflect the balance they try to keep between language ability and academic ambition, between their cultural identity and what they believe global expectations are, and between their own interests and what feels socially acceptable in class.

The findings point to four main ideas. Many students chose topics connected to Japanese culture because these felt familiar and safe (40%). Others wanted to choose topics they liked but held back because of language anxiety (47%). Many students adjusted their choices depending on the type of course (57%), and more than half thought carefully about how their topic reflected their identity in a global academic setting (57%). A large majority of students, 76%, would select Japan-focused topics even though the presentation language was English. This shows that using English did not replace their cultural identity; instead, students used both languages and cultural backgrounds in a strategic way to express themselves.

Concerns about classmates’ opinions also affected topic choice, reflecting the importance of group harmony. At the same time, choosing Japanese cultural topics helped students feel more confident and more connected to their identity. This suggests that teaching approaches that respect cultural knowledge can support students’ psychological needs in meaningful ways.

For teachers, these findings suggest that topic selection should be treated as an important part of student identity development. Providing support for more difficult topics, recognizing the value of students’ cultural knowledge, and clearly explaining expectations in different academic fields can help students grow in both language ability and confidence. Students’ careful thinking

about topic choice is something not always visible in class. It deserves understanding and support.

Overall, this research helps us see how students working in a second language navigate the personal and cultural challenges behind academic tasks. For many Japanese students, choosing a presentation topic in English is also a choice about how they want to present themselves. This makes topic selection an important part of language learning that deserves careful attention from both researchers and educators.

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