

Pragmatic functions of *I think* in computer-mediated, cross-cultural communication between Taiwanese and Japanese undergraduate students

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This study explores the functions of *I think* in synchronous, computer-mediated cross-cultural communication of Japanese and Taiwanese university students. The data used in this study were collected from the Cross-Cultural Distance Learning corpus, which contains transcriptions of recorded synchronous spoken and written interactions between Taiwanese and Japanese university students. To examine the functions of *I think*, occurrences of the phrase were screened, analyzed, and categorized based on collocation pattern, discourse context, and sequentiality. The Taiwanese students showed a greater tendency to use the various functions of *I think* in discourse than the Japanese students, who rarely used its functions in their online cross-cultural communication. The results suggest that their respective perceived conversation strategies may be a significant cause of variation in the frequency of use of *I think* functions.

Keywords: stance marker, *I think*, pragmatic functions, cross-cultural comparison, computer-mediated communication

1. Introduction

In most communicative situations involving interlocutors, discourse not only expresses knowledge but also conveys a stance on the topic at hand. In other words, we speak to convey propositional content and, most importantly, to channel a range of subjective meanings related to our value systems, identity, and even confidence (Hunston and Thompson 2000; Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Such understanding of interaction has sparked research investigation into stance expression, particularly epistemic-stance, in which “a speaker signals their relationship

towards the talk they are producing” (Kiesling 2011, 4). Previous research on epistemic-stance expression has largely focused on written language. For instance, Aijmer (2002) compares the range and frequency of certain key modal words in the English writing of advanced-level university students. McEnery and Kifle (2002) examine the ways in which learners of English qualify their claims in argumentative essay writing. Despite the contributions made by these studies to understanding of expressions of stance, it is also necessary to investigate the negotiation of position between and among language users in spoken or even computer-mediated discourses, particularly as these modes of interaction allow for limited editing and may demand the immediate processing of utterances (Bygate 2009).

Among various stance-markers, *I think* is one that has attracted great attention from applied linguists, for its prevalence across genres in spoken discourse (e.g. Baumgarten and House 2010; Kaltenböck 2009). As Scheibman (2001) suggests, *I think* allows speakers to personalize their utterances through passing judgment and expressing attitude by “automatically introduc[ing] an explicit argumentative perspective to the discourse” (Baumgarten and House 2010, 1185). Some researchers have revealed that nonnative speakers use this grammatical construction differently from native speakers. For instance, Zhang and Zabet (2014) observed that *I think* as a turn-taking device is used more often by nonnative speakers than by native speakers. Baumgarten and House (2010) also found that nonnative speakers use *I think* mainly to express either certainty or a lack of knowledge, whereas native speakers use this and other epistemic expressions to organize discourse and construct a verbal routine. Additionally, an investigation of English interviews with L1 Turkish speakers revealed that nonnative English speakers prefer to use personal stance expressions such as *I think* to convey messages while employing these expressions as discourse organizers less often (Sahin and Kilimci 2014). Another study highlighted the preference for evaluative *I think* by lower-level learners, which was attributed to linguistic constraints in nonnative speakers (Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig 2000).

The studies mentioned above only focus on differences between native and nonnative *I think*. Limited systematic analyses appear to have been conducted of the use of *I think* in communication between nonnative speakers. Baumgarten and House (2010), among others, highlight the importance of such investigation, remarking that “[i]n ELF communication, speakers of different L1s with potentially differing conventionalized patterns of stance-marking and stance-taking and differently diversified L2 varieties of English interact” (p. 1185).

Taken together, this study explores the pragmatic functions of *I think* as used by Taiwanese and Japanese undergraduate students in computer-mediated cross-cultural communication. The aim of the investigation is to identify the distribu-

tion of *I think* functions and the possible factors affecting their frequency of use. Specifically, the research questions this paper intends to address are:

1. How frequently do Taiwanese and Japanese university students use *I think* in a multilingual and multimodal corpus of synchronous, computer-mediated cross-cultural communication?
2. Which functions of *I think* are used by Taiwanese and Japanese university students in the corpus?
3. Do the frequencies and functions of *I think* resemble or differ between the two groups of students?
4. What are the possible contributing factors to the observed similarities and differences?

2. Pragmatic functions of *I think*

This study substantiates the claims made by Kaltenböck (2010) regarding the basic role of *I think* and the development of its other functions. In his view, *I think* has an inherent core meaning, which is activated in various ways depending on the 'concrete contextual realization' (Kaltenböck et al. 2010, 11). The stance marker has a basic function (evaluative) that can be intensified (emphatic) or de-intensified (tentative and mitigating), and can even manifest an evolved function (discursive). In other words, Kaltenböck (2010) contends that the basic evaluative function of *I think* conveying the central meaning of 'in my opinion' serves as a foundation for the particular marker in its acquisition of other pragmatic functions. Supporting Kaltenböck, Zhang (2014) posits that in a broader scope, *I think* manifests elasticity in its four functions, tentative, mitigating, emphatic, and discursive, which respectively depict fluidity, overlap, correlation, and the co-existence of roles. The tentative *I think* is used by speakers to express uncertainty and approximation (Jucker 1986). In her study of political interviews, Zhang (2014) observes that *I think* as an epistemic modal marker conveys vagueness and an avoidance of commitment to save social face (Aijmer 1997). This tentative function is particularly evident when *I think* is positioned at the end of a clause to express an epistemic afterthought (Conrad and Biber 2000; Kaltenböck 2013; Zhang 2014). As *I think* in the final position conveys doubt and suggests a lack of authority, it is, for example, not found in this position in political discourse, as this would defeat the communicative goals of a political speaker (Simon-Vanderbergen 2000).

In contrast with the expression of uncertainty in the tentative *I think*, the mitigating *I think* is used to soften or tone down the assertiveness of a message.

Termed a subjectivizer (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989), this phrasal downgrader not only softens directives but also supports a speaker's face-saving attempts (Ruzaitė 2007) and mitigates face threat (Aijmer 1997). Occurring almost as frequently as tag questions, the mitigating *I think* serves a hedge-like function particularly in emphatic statements (Preisler 1986). It softens a blunt assertion or functions as a negative politeness marker expressing primarily affective meaning (Holmes 1990; 1995). Additionally, the mitigating *I think* qualifies commitment, indicating the speaker's uncertainty about the truth of a proposition (Kärkkäinen 2010).

The third function, the emphatic *I think*, also known as the deliberative *I think*, conveys the speaker's certainty in and reassurance of the validity of the interpretation of the facts stated (Holmes 1984; Holmes 1990). Using *I think* adds weight, emphasis, and confidence to a statement. Additionally, the emphatic *I think* is considered deliberative, as it appears first in the utterance and is prosodically prominent (Aijmer 1997). In its fourth, discursive function, *I think* is a structural device (Aijmer 1997; Kärkkäinen 2003; Kaltenböck 2010). For instance, it can function as a stalling or filling device in the event of a gap in communication (Stenström 1995). *I think* in its discursive role thus plays an important role in online processing, hesitant speech, word searches, and repair (Mullan 2010). In its fifth, evaluative function, *I think* is used in utterances to convey speakers' evaluation of the topic discussed. It thereby serves as "a marker of the speaker's degree of belief, opinion or subjective evaluation of the proposition" (Baumgarten and House 2010; 1197). As suggested by Aijmer (1997) and supported by Ifantidou (2001), *I think* in this capacity conveys the central meaning of "I'm expressing my opinion." The evaluative *I think* neither softens nor boosts a statement, but instead expresses a propositional attitude, revealing the speaker's assessment and judgment of the truth of the statement.

3. Methodology

To investigate the functions and frequency of the use of *I think*, data were extracted from the Cross-Cultural Distance Learning (CCDL) corpus. Focusing on computer-mediated international communication, the CCDL corpus is a collaborative project undertaken by Waseda University (WU) in Tokyo, Japan and Yuan Ze University (YZU) in Taoyuan, Taiwan. To enrich cultural exchange and language learning, a two-way interactive online chat-room system (via the Live On software interface) was established to allow students to converse synchronously face to face. The interactions were primarily spoken, yet this interface also enabled the students to use multiple modalities such as audio, video, and text

and to share images, website links, and other multimedia files. The multilingual CCDL corpus contains 112,498 words, comprising 68,954 English, 37,171 Japanese, and 6,373 Chinese words.

The data drawn from the CCDL corpus were provided by 46 students (see Table 1), comprising 23 Taiwanese students from YZU and 23 Japanese students from WU. All were nonnative English speakers with proficiency levels ranging from B1 to B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. In terms of exposure to other languages, the Taiwanese participants had majored in both English and Japanese in their department, while the Japanese participants understood some Chinese characters because they used Kanji to write Japanese. As the CCDL corpus is multilingual, the participants used English, Japanese, and Chinese to facilitate their interactions.

Table 1. Profile of participants

Period	Taiwanese		Japanese		Total
	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Fall 2013	8	1	5	4	18
Spring 2014	13	1	4	10	28
Total	23		23		46

The data were collected in two periods: fall 2013 and spring 2014. First, the students volunteered to participate in the CCDL project, which was then followed by an orientation session explaining the processes of logging in to the online chat-room system and using the recording software. After the meeting, a group assignment was held in which the 46 participants were assigned to 11 groups according to availability. Each of the groups was provided with a list of weekly topics determined by both their Japanese and their Taiwanese professors (see Appendix A). The groups engaged in weekly 50-minute sessions for five weeks to maintain ongoing cross-cultural communication in cyberspace. The online interactions were mainly spoken through the two-way audio and video mode, and students resorted to text and multimedia to further aid their communication. The groups from fall 2013 were labeled 'Lavender' and those from spring 2014 were marked 'Yellow'. Their recorded interactions, which were transcribed verbatim in the abovementioned periods, were collected and analyzed in this study. The flow of communication afforded by the Live On platform is structured in a way that facilitates multimodal interactions. As seen in Figure 1, the spoken interactions with the presence of the interlocutors' faces are akin to the typical face-to-face interactions, with features such as turn-taking, overlapping, discourse markers and back-channels. Topic development may be initiated around objects introduced visually such as the glass of bubble tea in Figure 1. Served primarily as a

supplementary role, typed texts, as those in other text messaging platforms, are arranged by interlocutors, one after another. All these modes of interactions work with each other to facilitate meaningful interactions among parties involved.



Figure 1. Screenshot of the video showing the participants in the CCDL communication

Microsoft Excel Find function was run on the transcribed data to search for *I think* occurrences. Although the interactions were mainly spoken, an indicator was provided to note utterances in text format. To determine clusters and discourse context, occurrences were manually identified, analyzed, and coded from the transcripts. To ensure credibility, another rater checked 20% of the data with 90 % agreement (item to item). Additionally, two other researchers were also consulted in relation to data coding.

The data analysis was mainly qualitative, supplemented by quantitative analysis to strengthen the robustness of the research. The qualitative part of the analysis was conducted at discourse level, due to the significant role of correlated utterances in implicitly or explicitly prompting a stance (Kärkkäinen 2003; 2006). It is essential to methodically associate the structure and function of the correlated utterances; in Kärkkäinen's (2012, 2194) words, "viewing the utterance as a whole

as performing some discourse function or constituting some action". The descriptive data reveal the speakers' maneuvers and turn taking in their use of *I think* during their interactions.

Criteria for analyzing *I think*

Insights into the functions of *I think* as an expression of epistemic stance, such as expressing opinions, maintaining relationships between interlocutors, and organizing discourse, have motivated researchers to propose different sets of criteria to help determine the functions of *I think*. For instance, Holmes (1990) points out that context, which specifies the relationships between the participants, the topic, and the level of formality of the interaction, is key to determining *I think* functions. Aijmer (1997) also observes that prosodic, grammatical, and positional criteria must be considered when identifying the functions of *I think*, particularly to determine whether it takes a deliberative or a tentative function. Several other researchers integrate the aforementioned criteria to argue that semantic criteria, syntactic position, prosodic features, and the linguistic and situational context of occurrence must be analyzed to determine the functions of *I think* in spoken discourse (Aijmer 1997; Simon-Vanderbergen 2000; Kaltenböck 2009).

The current study adopted the specifications made by Aijmer (1997) as well as Kadar and Haugh (2013), specifically with respect to collocation, the situational context of occurrence and sequentiality. Although prosodic features and syntactic positions are included in Aijmer's criteria, this study focuses on the three aforementioned criteria since they are conveniently found in the data and take interactional view into account:

Collocation patterns

One important criterion used in analyzing *I think* functions in the data is clustering. *I think* clusters with conjunctions such as *and*, *because*, *but*, and *so*; such stance marker mainly performs evaluative or emphatic functions (Zhang 2014). *Maybe* added before *I think* can be used to express tentativeness and mitigation, and clustering the epistemic phrase with fillers such as *uh* or *um* serves a discursive function (Wu et al. 2010). Meanwhile, *I think* followed by *that* typically expresses evaluation and emphasis (Thompson and Mulac 1991; Aijmer 1997). According to Aijmer (1997), repeated *I think* or *I think* followed by *maybe* can convey tentativeness or fulfill a discursive function. Besides identifying the first word before and after *I think*, the study considers other neighboring words in the utterance that may help to determine the pragmatic role of the marker. For example, *I think* clustered with nonadjacent neighboring expressions such as *should*,

quite, and *almost* can emphasize a statement, convey uncertainty, or soften a proposition.

Discourse contexts

In addition to collocation, the broader context of occurrence is a useful criterion for identifying the function of *I think*. The study adapts the list of discourse contexts that may contain *I think* as presented by Baumgarten and House (2010): answering a question, corroborating another's utterance, introducing a new or related topic, expressing agreement, drawing a conclusion, expressing a contrasting view, displaying knowledge, elaborating on a previous utterance, sharing personal experience, rejecting another's contribution, reinforcing one's own preceding claim, simple explanation, and making a suggestion.

Sequentiality

As proposed by Kadar and Haugh (2013), sequentiality "refers to the way in which current turns or utterances are always understood relative to the prior and subsequent talk, particularly talk that is continuous" (p.112). Similarly, Heritage (2012) argues that consideration of the relative epistemic statuses of the speaker and hearer are a fundamental element in the construction of social action. This criterion is crucial as we take into account the interactional perspective when analyzing the functions of *I think*, i.e. the immediate co-text or initiating and responding utterances.

4. Findings

4.1 Overall frequency of *I think*

This investigation of the functions of *I think* as used by Japanese and Taiwanese university students in their online cross-cultural communication reveals 316 occurrences of the stance marker from a total of 112,498 words used in the corpus (see Table 2). The prevalence of this subject-predicate combination in the CCDL corpus was also found in Baumgarten and House's (2010) study of COCA and BNC, notably the spoken component. Such significant number of occurrences also supports the previous claim that speakers generally speak more often about themselves than others in conversation, sharing their feelings about, attitudes toward, and views of the world (Scheibman, 2001).

The data also indicate that the aforementioned nonnative speakers used 32% of *I think* in its typical role: to mark their stance, conveying the sense of 'in my opinion'. Such finding is somewhat contrary to the claim that speakers use *I*

Table 2. Frequency of *I think* functions in the corpus

<i>I think</i> function	Raw figure	Percentage
Evaluative	101	32.0%
Emphatic	94	29.7%
Tentative	65	20.6%
Discursive	32	10.1%
Mitigating	24	7.6%
Total	316	100%

think mainly to express either certainty or lack of knowledge (Baumgarten and House 2010). Another noticeable result was the high frequency of use of the emphatic *I think* (29.7%) and the tentative *I think* (20.6%) by these nonnative speakers of English, who preferred to use *I think* to emphasize their epistemic claims than to use the mitigating *I think* (7.6%) to tone down strong claims. In other words, these speakers preferred to add strength (Holmes 1984) and weight (Aijmer 1997) to their assertions by using the emphatic *I think* as a booster to express certainty, authority, and reassurance (Brown 1980; Holmes 1990). These findings contrast with the previous claim that the use of *I think* to indicate certainty is infrequently used (Aijmer 1997; Kaltenböck 2010). In addition to the emphatic *I think*, however, the tentative *I think* was regularly used by these speakers, conveying approximation and uncertainty. They might have used *I think* in this way to express a lack of knowledge (Simon-Vandenberg 2000) and a high level of subjectivity. It is also noteworthy that the discursive *I think*, commonly used by native speakers to carry out “routinized work in conversation organization” (Kärkkäinen 2003, 145), was also used by the Japanese and Taiwanese students, albeit at a minimal frequency (10.1%). In sum, the results indicate that *I think* had retained its epistemic functions of evaluation and certainty in the discourse of the Japanese and Taiwanese students recorded, suggesting a transition in the function of *I think* from epistemic to interpersonal and then to discourse-organizational (Kaltenböck 2013; Zhang 2014).

4.2 Comparison of distribution of *I think*

The distribution of *I think* functions in the Japanese students’ discourse is illustrated in Table 3. Of the five main functions of *I think*, the evaluative *I think* was used at the highest frequency (41.9%), followed by the emphatic *I think* (33.8%). In addition to using the marker to express stance in a typical way, conveying the sense of ‘in my opinion’, the Japanese students regularly used the emphatic *I think*, despite expressing minimal assessment and contributing less to the conversation than their Taiwanese counterparts.

Table 3. Distribution of *I think* functions in Japanese and Taiwanese students' discourses

<i>I think</i> function	Japanese students		Taiwanese students	
	Raw figure	Percentage	Raw figure	Percentage
Evaluative	31	41.9%	70	28.9%
Emphatic	25	33.8%	69	28.5%
Tentative	10	13.5%	55	22.7%
Discursive	5	6.8%	27	11.2%
Mitigating	3	4.1%	21	8.7%
Total	74	100%	242	100.0%

The Taiwanese students most frequently used the evaluative *I think* (28.9%) and the emphatic *I think* (28.5%) in their discourses. They also used the tentative *I think* (22.7%), which made up almost a quarter of their *I think* utterances, in contrast with the claim that the use of *I think* to indicate certainty is scarcely used (Aijmer 1997; Kaltenböck 2010). A possible reason for their significant use of *I think* is the informal and conversational nature of the data. As the Taiwanese speakers sought to elicit responses and encourage their Japanese counterparts to participate more, they might have preferred to convey their stance in a less authoritative way to sound less threatening. The Taiwanese students also used *I think* to perform routine organizational tasks (the discursive *I think*) and to tone down assertiveness (the mitigating *I think*), albeit at lower frequencies.

Comparison of the use of *I think* between the Taiwanese and Japanese students revealed that both sets of nonnative speakers of English used the evaluative *I think*, followed by *I think* in its emphatic, tentative, discursive, and mitigating functions, respectively. The data reveal that both sets of speakers made multi-functional use of *I think*. The evaluative *I think* serves as a baseline, which when strengthened becomes the emphatic *I think* and when weakened becomes the tentative and mitigating *I think* (Zhang 2014). With further evolution, the discourse marker develops a new function: to perform organizational tasks during interaction.

A difference was found in the total frequency of use, as the Taiwanese students more frequently expressed their epistemic stance than the Japanese students. This difference in frequency may be attributed to the different roles played by the Japanese and Taiwanese students in their computer-mediated communication. The Japanese students were more passive: merely responding or reacting to the utterances of their Taiwanese counterparts. Without the latter's encouragement, the former mostly remained silent and unresponsive. Additionally, the Japanese students used silence to stall for time, to gain an adequate grasp of the subject matter, or to prepare for their next utterances (Nakane 2006), which as previously mentioned were mostly responses to questions asked or comments made

by the Taiwanese speakers. These occurrences reflected the typical dynamics of Japanese conversation, which is analogous to “the game of bowling” (Sakamoto and Naotsuka 1982). Japanese interlocutors project reserved behavior, wait for their turn to speak, express their ideas carefully, and allow for appropriate pauses between turns, making them appear unresponsive and unspontaneous (Kato 2001; Ogasawara 1995; Tanaka 1986; Tsuda, Shigemitsu, and Murata 2007). The Taiwanese students played a comparatively dominant role in the interaction. They mostly initiated topics, introduced new ideas, and asked questions of the other interlocutors. They seemed to carry the burden of maintaining the flow of the conversation and avoiding dead air, which reflects the Taiwanese students’ less tolerance of silence, as is evidenced by their interaction dynamics in the corpus. Such verbal behaviors displayed by the Taiwanese students are identical to that of the native English speakers in their cross-cultural communication with the Japanese speakers (Kato 2001; Ogasawara 1995; Tanaka 1986; Tsuda, Shigemitsu, and Murata 2007).

In the following sections, selected examples will be used to illustrate each of the five pragmatic functions of *I think*.

4.2.1 *Evaluative ‘I think’*

As a marker of epistemic stance, the evaluative *I think* is used to “present speaker comments on the status of information in a proposition” (Biber et al. 2010, 972). The Taiwanese university students (70 instances in total) used the evaluative *I think* almost twice as frequently than their Japanese counterparts (31 instances). The gap between these sets of two nonnative speakers of English in their use of the evaluative *I think* may suggest that Taiwanese students are more inclined to speak about their own thoughts, attitudes, and opinions than Japanese students. On the other hand, Japanese students’ reluctance to express their opinions may be attributed to their perceived potential of making “the interlocutors lose face” (Blight and Stephens 2006, 43).

In Extract 1, a Taiwanese student elaborates on her previous utterance in relation to studying English in Taiwan. As the Japanese speakers respond with some surprise to her description of her early English training in her country (signified with the use of ‘!’), she later provides further details on this preference for early language training. Her explanation results in a Japanese student’s apparent expression of surprise, “Wow,” which prompts the original speaker to express an evaluative *I think* utterance: “*But I think that is a little bit pressure*” a way of providing her opinion with regard to the negative consequence of this educational practice. All of the interlocutors then respond by laughing, and the same Japanese speaker replies, “*Yes, it’s hard for children in kindergarten.*” This remark prompts the Taiwanese speaker to agree with the former’s statement and provides additional rea-

sons for agreeing, and then finally to end her utterance by stating her evaluation of the situation as in “*I think that is difficult.*”

Extract 1. (Lavender 7, Week 5) (TW = Taiwanese student; JP = Japanese student)

- | | | |
|----|-----|--|
| 1 | TW1 | But, uh, now... now many children have study their English in kindergarten. |
| 2 | JP2 | Kindergarten? |
| 3 | JP1 | Kindergarten!? Wow! |
| 4 | TW1 | Yeah! Because their parents want to they be more competitive so they think they need, uh train Chinese and English at same time. |
| 5 | | |
| 6 | JP1 | Wow! |
| 7 | TW1 | But I think that is a little bit pressure. |
| 8 | All | Haha. |
| 9 | JP1 | Yes, it's hard for children in kindergarten. |
| 10 | TW1 | Yeah! Because they don't know letter but they have to say the English sentence. I think that is difficult. |
| 11 | | |

An example of the use of the evaluative *I think* by the Japanese speakers is provided in Extract 2. After introducing the Japanese term for the month of May, a Japanese speaker elaborates on her previous utterance by further explaining the word. Toward the middle of her discourse, she offers an evaluative statement: “*I think it is a beautiful word in Japan.*” *I think* in this utterance is evaluative as it carries the meaning of “in my opinion” and focuses on the epistemic assessment of the Japanese speaker. Additionally, the stance marker is clustered neither with a softener to convey tentativeness nor a booster to strengthen the claim or convey authority.

Extract 2. (Lavender 7, Week 5)

- | | | |
|---|-----|--|
| 1 | JP1 | So in Japan, uh, May is called さつき
sa tsu ki
'May' |
| 2 | TW1 | さつき?
sa tsu ki
'May' |
| 3 | JP1 | This is traditional name of May. [Texting: さつき]
sa tsu ki
'May' |
| 4 | TW1 | [Texting: oh] |
| 5 | JP1 | I think it is a beautiful word in Japan. [Texting: さつき]
sa tsu ki
'May' |
| 6 | TW1 | [Texting: さつき?]
sa tsu ki
'May' |
| 7 | JP1 | Yes, this is a traditional name of May in Japan. |
| 8 | | えー、さつきって漢字出せるかな?
e ~ satsuki tte kanji daseru kana?
'Well, can I get you to type the Chinese character for satsuki?' |

4.2.2 Emphatic 'I think'

Although both the emphatic and evaluative *I think* are used to express evaluative stance, they differ in that the emphatic *I think* conveys the assertiveness and authority of the speaker while the evaluative *I think* centers on epistemic assess-

ment (Zhang 2014). In this study, the Taiwanese students (69 instances) used emphatic *I think* approximately three times more than that of their Japanese counterparts (25 instances). As the Japanese students only minimally expressed their stance and contributed less than the Taiwanese speakers to the conversation, it is unsurprising that they used the emphatic *I think* less frequently in their discourses. One of the possible explanations for the Japanese' minimal use of emphatic construction is their tendency to "behave politely" (Shigemitsu 2012, 2)

An example of emphatic *I think* located in the corpus is shown in Extract 3. To describe the discourse context, the Japanese student said he read the book being discussed in the conversation. To further ask about his opinion, the Taiwanese student asked if he likes it and as a response, the Japanese student replied, "Yeah, and I also see the movie." Having heard his response to her question, the Taiwanese student supported his claim by saying, "Yeah, and I think it is really a sad story." In this extract, *I think* is clustered with the confirmation marker "yeah" and the booster "really", which further strengthens and intensifies the Taiwanese student's claim regarding the book being discussed.

Extract 3. (Lavender 8, Week 5)

1	JP1	I read this book.
2	TW1	Umm, so do you like this?
3	JP1	Yeah, and I also see the movie.
4	TW1	Yeah, and I think it is really a sad story.
5	JP1	Umm.
6	TW1	Yeah. OK, so that's all about me.
7	JP1 and JP2	Thank you.

Extract 4 gives an illustration of how Japanese students use emphatic *I think* in their discourses. While the Taiwanese student was looking for the logo of a Taiwanese beer, the Japanese student responded, "Yes please." The Taiwanese student requested for the Japanese interlocutors to wait as he was searching for it. The Japanese student responded, "Okay" followed by the utterance of another Japanese student: "I think Jump is very bad." The Taiwanese student wanted the previous speaker to clarify what she said and so she responded, "You like woman and alcohol. Haha" Such *I think* utterance expresses the Japanese student's opinion of the Taiwanese student in its clause-initial position clustered with a booster, "very", which adds weight to the claim.

Extract 4. Lavender 12, Week 2

1	JP1	Yes please.
2	TW1	Wait me a moment.
3	JP1	Okay.
4	JP2	I think Jump is very bad.
5	TW1	What? What?
6	JP2	You like woman and alcohol. Haha.
7	TW1	It's the logo.

4.2.3 Tentative ‘*I think*’

In addition to its function as a booster “strengthening the speaker’s commitment,” *I think* can also perform as a hedging device, “generally weakening the speaker’s commitment” (Ifantidou 2001, 155). Accordingly, the stance marker is used in utterances as an epistemic qualifier or quality hedge, expressing a minimal level of certainty and indicating a noncommittal stance on the truth of the utterance (Aijmer 1997), thereby performing a tentative function. The Taiwanese student participants (55 instances) used the tentative *I think* five times more than the Japanese students (10 instances). These data suggest that the Taiwanese speakers might have preferred to convey their stance with approximation and uncertainty to appear less authoritative and establish rapport with their Japanese counterparts.

In Extract 5, recording the participants’ discussion of the sizes of television screens in their respective countries, the Taiwanese student expresses uncertainty when elaborating on her previous utterance regarding the ‘42 size’ of a television. She starts with a description of a typical television size in a Taiwanese household, clustering it with ‘*maybe*’, which signals tentativeness and uncertainty (Aijmer 1997), and ‘*like*’, which suggests approximation. Additionally, *I think* in this utterance is in the clause-final position, as if an afterthought (Conrad and Biber 2000; Kaltenböck 2013), expressing tentativeness (Aijmer 1997; Simon-Vandenbergen 2000). In this excerpt, the tentative *I think* functions as “a marker of the speaker’s lack of knowledge” (Simon-Vandenbergen 2000, 51) of television size.

Extract 5. (Lavender 8, Week 5)

- | | | |
|---|-----|--|
| 1 | TW1 | Do you know 42 size? 42 |
| 2 | JP1 | 42 size? |
| 3 | TW1 | For example, in the normal family, the TV’s size, the screen is maybe like 30, |
| 4 | | 30 I think. But maybe in then <small>カラオ</small> the size may be 42 to 60.
<small>karaoke</small>
<small>‘karaoke’</small> |
| 5 | JP1 | Oh. |
| 6 | TW1 | About 60. |

Extract 6 records an exchange between two Japanese students and a Taiwanese student in which the latter starts a new topic by asking a question pertaining to a particular food. Attempting to elicit a response, she asks if the Japanese speakers know about the two kinds of the food. One of the Japanese speakers replies, “*Maybe in Japan かき is only the hard one. I think so. How about you?*” This utterance conveys uncertainty and a lack of knowledge, as it includes the word “*maybe*.” Although the speaker specifies “*only the hard one*,” which expresses some degree of certainty, this utterance is succeeded by “*I think so*,” conveying the sense of an afterthought, before the speaker projects the question to the other speakers.

Extract 6. (Lavender 7, Week 3)

- 1 TW1 Do you know there are two kind of かき?
ka ki
'oysters'
- 2 JP1 Two kinds of?
- 3 TW1 The tough and the soft one. You know?
- 4 JP1 Maybe in Japan かき is only the hard one. I think so. How about you?
ka ki
'oysters'
- 5 JP2 I think so, too.
- 6 JP1 Maybe we have not eaten the soft one. かき
ka ki
'oysters'
- 7 TW1 Oh.

4.2.4 Discursive 'I think'

As mentioned earlier, *I think* can also be used to organize information in conversation (Kärkkäinen 2003). In this textual and interactional capacity, the marker is labeled the discursive *I think*. A significant difference was observed in the use of this function between the two sets of speakers. Approximately five times more of the uses of *I think* by the Taiwanese students (27 instances) functioned as the discursive *I think*, compared with those of the Japanese students (five instances). This difference in frequency strongly suggests that the Taiwanese students were more aware of the flexibility available in positioning the *I think* marker, particularly in placing it outside the grammatical structure of the utterance. The versatility of the positioning of *I think* in the utterances of the Taiwanese students may indicate a process of language evolution (Traugott 1995) that is evident not only to native speakers but even to nonnative speakers. According to Traugott (1995), such progression involves a linguistic form originating as a lexical item that loses its referential meaning as it develops but concurrently acquires meanings at the textual, pragmatic, and subjective levels. The data on the uses of *I think* by the Taiwanese students suggest that the speakers used the linguistic form in different syntactic positions, reflecting its versatility, its vagueness, and the context-dependence of its meaning. As a result, *I think* became significantly less dependent on the syntax of the utterance and could thus be used in various structures, each performing different roles in the discourse.

Extract 7 illustrates the use of the discursive *I think* by a Taiwanese student. The speaker refers to a 'buffet', but the other speakers do not immediately comprehend the meaning of the word. This gap in communication results in word repetition, which the Japanese speakers eventually understand. Next, the same Taiwanese student introduces a new topic, "カラオケ" 'karaoke'. She begins her description with "In Taiwan カラオケ is umm I think is the umm..." In this case, *I think* is used for online planning: the speaker attempts to buy time and stall

the conversation until she has identified an appropriate word to describe a music room or karaoke.

Extract 7. (Lavender 8, Week 5)

- | | | |
|---|-----|--|
| 1 | TW1 | Umm, maybe because maybe we will have the buffet. |
| 2 | JP1 | Buffet. |
| 3 | TW1 | Yes, buffet. If you pay more money, you can eat. |
| 4 | JP1 | Oh. |
| 5 | TW1 | Buffet B--f-f- buffet. |
| 6 | JP1 | Oh oh oh buffet. |
| 7 | TW1 | Yes. |
| 8 | JP1 | Oh. |
| 9 | TW1 | In Taiwan カラオケ is umm <i>I think</i> is the umm...in the special room.
karaoke
'karaoke' |

A Japanese student's use of the discursive *I think* is recorded in Extract 8. A Taiwanese student initially expresses his thoughts on being acquainted or not with others. To confirm that he has accurately understood what has been said, a Japanese student says, "*Feeling, acquainted, each other. Er...me, I think*," which is affirmed by the Taiwanese speaker with "*yap*." As he begins answering the question and expressing his opinion, he says, "*Er...I think my, ha ha*." The *I think* occurrence in this extract shows no clear syntactic position, and is clustered with "*er*" and "*haha*." Therefore, this use of *I think* has a discursive role, as it functions as a filling or stalling device, providing the speaker with time to gather his thoughts. Furthermore, although the laughter toward the end of the utterance may manifest face-saving, suggesting that *I think* has a mitigating function, no clear opinion is stated by the Japanese speaker, which may disqualify the phrase from performing such a role.

Extract 8. (Yellow 7, Week 1)

- | | | |
|---|-----|---|
| 1 | TW1 | Sometimes, because I thought, I think you are not the, you are not the, you |
| 2 | | are not very acquainted with each other, would you think about, would you |
| 3 | | have a feeling about that? not acquainted, not acquainted with each other. |
| 4 | JP1 | Feeling, acquainted, each other. Er...me, I think... |
| 5 | TW1 | Yap. |
| 6 | JP1 | Er... <i>I think my, ha ha</i> . |
| 7 | TW1 | Yeah your teammate. |
| 8 | JP1 | My teammate. |
| 9 | TW1 | Is also, is all fantastic? |

4.2.5 Mitigating *I think*'

Functioning to weaken the intensity of an utterance, the mitigating *I think* conveys softness and politeness (Jucker 1986; Trappes-Lomax 2007). Compared with the tentative *I think*, which is rarely used on purpose, as in the case of a lack of knowledge, the mitigating *I think* is used by speakers intentionally and strategically (Zhang 2014). In our data, the Taiwanese students (21 instances) used the mitigating *I think* seven times more frequently than their Japanese counterparts (three instances). These findings indicate that the Taiwanese students might have

attempted to reduce the intensity of their expression of stance, probably motivated by their interest in engaging the Japanese speakers in the interaction by sounding less threatening.

Extract 9 illustrates the use of the mitigating *I think* by a Taiwanese student. She responds in the affirmative to a Japanese student's inquiry regarding a Japanese television program, and elaborates on her answer by mentioning the many singers who appear on the show. As a final remark, she says, "Very worth to see it, *I think*." This utterance initially conveys evaluation in an assertive tone, particularly in the use of "very." However, toward the end of the statement, the Taiwanese speaker says, "*I think*." Therefore, this occurrence of the marker achieves a mitigating function, as it occupies the clause-final position and performs a hedge-like role within an emphatic statement.

Extract 9. (Lavender 7, Week 1)

- | | | |
|---|-----|--|
| 1 | JP1 | So have you ever seen this TV program? |
| 2 | TW1 | Yes. |
| 3 | JP1 | <i>Kohaku</i> . |
| 4 | TW1 | Yes, because there are many famous singer in Japan to come to show the different show in program, very worth to see it, <i>I think</i> . |
| 5 | JP1 | Oh...so...uh...what are you good doing? What are you good at doing? |
| 6 | TW1 | Is our strength? |

An example of the use of the mitigating *I think* by a Japanese student is shown in Extract 10. Here, a Taiwanese student solicits suggestions from the other speakers for improving the CCDL class. A Japanese student replies, "Umm, *actually your English is good, I think*." This utterance at first appears emphatic, with the use of "*actually*" to convey intensity. However, the Japanese student uses *I think* toward the end of the utterance, softening and toning down his claim. Here, therefore, the use of *I think* has a mitigating role, serving as a hedge to the emphatic statement "*actually your English is good*."

Extract 10. (Lavender 7, Week 5)

- | | | |
|---|-----|---|
| 1 | TW1 | I makes you. And so...right now we have... |
| 2 | JP1 | And there...right now we have all learned CCDL class. |
| 3 | TW2 | Do you find anything we can improve next time? Or some advice to give us, or you need to... |
| 4 | | give us, or you need to... |
| 5 | JP1 | Umm, <i>actually your English is good, I think</i> . And Japanese are also good. I was surprised. |
| 6 | | good. I was surprised. |
| 7 | TW2 | Yeah. |
| 8 | TW1 | And <i>I think</i> your English is also good, is more fluent than other people. |
| 9 | TW2 | Yeah. |

5. Discussion

The results indicate that in their computer-mediated, cross-cultural communication, both Taiwanese and Japanese speakers used the evaluative *I think* more

frequently than *I think* in its other functions, and to use the mitigating *I think* the least. In addition, both the Taiwanese and Japanese students seemed to show interest in establishing rapport in their cross-cultural communication, but used different approaches. For example, the Japanese students tended to use the emphatic *I think* to convey assurance when agreeing with another speaker, whereas the Taiwanese students were more likely to use the tentative *I think* to convey approximation when expressing evaluative statements.

In terms of differences, the findings indicate that the Taiwanese students displayed more awareness of the different functions of *I think* in discourse, as suggested by their high frequency of use of *I think* utterances performing various roles. These nonnative speakers used the stance marker to convey opinion, i.e., a propositional attitude (the evaluative *I think*); to hedge (the tentative or mitigating *I think*); as a booster (the emphatic *I think*); or in its evolved function, as a structural device. The Taiwanese students played a comparatively dominant role in the interaction by initiating topics, introducing new ideas, asking questions and establishing rapport with the presence of the various functions of *I think*. They seemed to carry the burden of maintaining the flow of conversation and avoiding dead air.

On the other hand, the Japanese students used the five functions of *I think* much infrequently than their Taiwanese counterparts in their online cross-cultural communication. This suggests that the Japanese speakers are less aware of the multiple functions of *I think*, and that their conversational styles may be a significant factor determining the ways in which such nonnative speakers express subjective meanings and take stances in their interactions. As Davidson (1998) explains, Japanese discourse involves low risk taking, which suggests that Japanese speakers delay their expressions of stance to allow them to consider others' viewpoints and to be certain of their evaluation. They thus avoid engaging in behavior that puts them at risk of being negatively evaluated (Brown 2004) or making "the interlocutors lose face" (Blight and Stephens 2006: 43). Such reserved behavior makes them appear unresponsive and unspontaneous (Kato 2001; Tsuda, Shigemitsu, and Murata 2007). After delaying expressions of stance to give ample time for careful deliberation, the Japanese speakers involved in this study tended to use the emphatic *I think* to convey a final evaluative statement with certainty and commitment. This apparent preference for the emphatic *I think* seems to be in contrast with the findings of a study suggesting that Japanese students use self-qualification to avoid committing to a stance (Mori 1999). A possible explanation of this difference is that the Japanese students involved in the current study delayed the expression of their opinion for long enough to gain a high degree of certainty, hence their decision to use the emphatic *I think* to express certainty, authority, and reassurance.

6. Conclusion

This study provides a detailed analysis of the use of *I think* in computer-mediated cross-cultural communication and explores the distribution of this discourse marker in the CCDL corpus. The five functions of *I think* – evaluative, emphatic, tentative, mitigating, and discursive – are the focus of the study. To identify these functions, the study adopted the list of criteria used by Aijmer (1997) as well as Kadar and Haugh (2013), specifically with respect to collocation, the situational context of occurrence and sequentiality.

This study raises awareness of the various roles by *I think* can perform – roles that functioned to express speaker stance in computer-mediated cross-cultural communication between Japanese and Taiwanese students. As online intercultural communication appears to be a popular means for English learners to practice the target language, considerable attention should be paid to the expression of opinion, assessment, and attitude by these language learners. Language teachers can design curricula and develop materials to hone intercultural communicative and strategic competence, particularly in conveying stance. The incorporation of effective stance marking into language learning can build learner confidence in expressing evaluative statements and further aid students as they engage in cross-cultural interaction. Additionally, as the findings indicate that the groups to which the Japanese and Taiwanese students were assigned significantly influenced the use of *I think* in their cross-cultural communication, it is important for teachers to allocate learners to groups with due care and attention. Degree of familiarity tends to influence the expression of opinion, particularly Taiwanese students, and it is crucial for language teachers to be conscious of this factor as they plan lessons so as to avoid causing anxiety. Rather, teachers should aim to encourage students to express their thoughts in English.

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Appendix A. Weekly topics for fall 2013 and spring 2014

Week	Spring 2013	Spring 2014
1	A. Self-introduction B. Hometown food	Self-introduction
2	Food, eating culture, and behavior	Introduction to natural world heritage sites (or to-be natural world heritage sites, or natural sites of outstanding universal value) in their respective countries
3	Differences in festivals between countries	Introduction to natural world heritage sites in their respective countries
4	Introduction of movies or music from hometowns	A. Communication problems or difficulties experienced during the three previous discussions B. Solutions to problems and ways of improving future cross-cultural interaction
5	Cultural differences and human relations	Review of televised conference

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