In this study, by examining the use of questions in Japanese and American English teacher-student conversations, I find that patterns of asking questions provide examples of culturally shaped Japanese and American social interaction.

The data in this study demonstrate that Japanese teachers ask questions to suggest a topic to share, to help students talk in more explanatory ways, and even to create a climax for a student’s story. Students, on the other hand, deliberately avoid asking questions that would majorly affect the conversational flow. In contrast, American teachers and students both equally ask questions for purposes such as confirming what has been heard and eliciting personal views.

These results suggest that Japanese questioning displays role performance that is compatible with the role expectations that permeate Japan’s “vertical society.” In Japanese society, superior-subordinate relationships are typically characterized as quasi parent-child relationships between supporting and dependent partners (Lebra 1976). In contrast, American questioning reflects Americans’ attempts to maintain equal relationships as individuals under egalitarian idealism.

It is concluded that Japanese teachers and students ask questions according to their sense of place, i.e. wakimae, while American teachers and students volitionally ask questions according to their intentions regardless of the differences in their roles.

Keywords: teacher-student conversation, questions, contrastive study of Japanese and American English.