

Impediments facing Japanese Learners of English: a Pilot Study

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Abstract

Many Japanese learners of English have the perception that they are unable to communicate effectively in spoken English. Three possible reasons for this are the failure of the Japanese educational system, low self-esteem regarding speaking English, and Japanese cultural personality tendencies. This article outlines the findings of a pilot survey investigating these factors and discusses the results of a questionnaire designed to identify their relative importance and interaction. Preliminary results suggest a continuous reassessment of beliefs regarding English language learning, as well as changes to English language teaching approaches and methods, is needed in order to provide Japanese EFL learners with an appropriate context in which to learn the language. This preliminary study leads to a larger quantitative research involving 1,299 university students.

1 . Introduction

When Japanese people are asked if they can speak English, many will say haltingly: "I'm sorry. I can write and read English, but I can't speak it well." This is an indicator of the over-reluctance of many learners to speak English, especially in group conversations. While there are obvious exceptions, this tends to be the case for most Japanese, including even Japanese scholars of Shakespeare. In

a general survey, in which 1,300 business people participated, many respondents reported that they believed that their communication in English did not result in high comprehension. Specifically, 79.4% were not satisfied with their speaking ability (Koike, 1993, p.293). The results of the survey suggest that Japanese learners of English suffer from a perceived or actual poor communication ability in the English language.

Although this may be partly the result of the inherent language distance between English and Japanese (including the effect of Japanese cultural characteristics on language), it seems likely that it is also related to the way English is taught and learned in Japan. The following paper therefore aims to examine aspects of the language learning process which negatively influence the process of learning to communicate in English, specifically regarding the Japanese education system, perceived impediments to English language acquisition reported by learners themselves, and the interaction of these two factors.

2. Method, Procedure and Subjects

A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was distributed to ten subjects, all of whom were subsequently interviewed by telephone and asked for supplementary information regarding their beliefs about the impediments they faced, and any other additional information felt necessary to fully complete the study.

The ten Japanese people who were selected had all received official instruction in English as a Foreign Language for six years in their junior and senior high schools in Japan. In addition, all of the subjects had continued to study English either in language institutes or on their own as a requirement for work or study. At the time of the study, they had all been in the U. S. for periods varying from 0.7 to 10 years, the average being 1.5 years. The participants' English language proficiency varied from high intermediate to advanced level. Other details were as

follows :

Sex : Female-5 Male-5

Age : 20's-1 30's-4 40's-5

Occupation : Graduate student-4

(majors : physics, psychology, linguistics, education)

Japanese instructor-1

Professor-2 (fields of study : education, sociology)

Clerk at Japanese Embassy-3 (1 receptionist, 2 translators)

3. Discussion

The learners' responses to the questionnaire and follow-up telephone interview yielded some interesting results, as Table 1 and Table 2 below indicate.

The findings generally confirm that Japanese feel they cannot communicate in

Table 1 : What are your poorest areas ? (Choose all that apply)

	Speaking	Listening	Grammar	Reading	Writing
S 1	✓		✓		
S 2	✓		✓		
S 3	✓		✓		
S 4	✓		✓		✓
S 5	✓		✓		
S 6	✓		✓		
S 7	✓				
S 8	✓				
S 9					✓
S 10					✓

Table 2: As for your speaking ability, what factors hindered (or are hindering) you from improving your communication skills? (Choose 3 items)

Linguistic Factors : G = grammar, V = vocabulary, P = pronunciation

Cultural Factors : CD = cultural difference

Educational Factors : MA = material, T = EFL teacher, ME = methodology

Psychological Factors : A = anxiety, F = fear, PE = personality

	G	V	P	CD	MA	T	ME	A	F	PE
S 1		✓	✓							✓
S 2		✓	✓				✓		✓	
S 3			✓				✓			✓
S 4			✓				✓			✓
S 5			✓	✓				✓		
S 6			✓	✓					✓	
S 7			✓				✓		✓	
S 8		✓	✓						✓	
S 9		✓				✓			✓	
S 10		✓					✓			✓

English properly. There are three main areas regarding this belief that I wish to discuss: the Japanese educational system, self-esteem and common Japanese personality characteristics.

The participants' responses indicate their frustration with the Japanese education system. They appear to feel that because they were not taught properly while at school, they do not have sufficient communicative ability. "These skills were not taught officially in school, and I could not find any appropriate strategy to improve them," said one respondent. This belief seems to be partly responsible for low self-esteem in relation to speaking and listening. Another respondent expressed the opinion that "teachers have no ability to give their students oral lessons correctly, because English teachers at public schools in Japan are selected only according to

the number of points they achieve on a paper exam and they have very few opportunities to improve their English skills in English speaking countries after getting a job.” These responses seem to indicate a negative reaction to the prevailing grammar-translation (*yakudoku*) method of teaching in junior and senior high school. Because of this, some learners added in the telephone interview that it was best to learn English in an English-speaking country. This may not be an expression of the need for immersion in the language, as much as a statement of frustration with prevailing English teaching approaches and methods in Japan.

This negative reaction notwithstanding, somewhat obsessive attitudes towards accuracy (leaning towards perfection) as a prerequisite for communication persisted. Respondents reported, for example, feeling more unwilling to communicate actively if they could not pronounce words correctly. This is evident in the results shown in Table 2. Most of the learners placed high importance on pronunciation when communicating in English. Moreover, when respondents report pronunciation problems, their self-esteem appears lower. As one stated, “native speakers’ confused reactions, discomfort and frequent requests for me to repeat what I am saying are very discouraging.” This discouragement appears to nurture a yearning in the Japanese for perfect pronunciation as a prerequisite to comfortable conversation in English.

In addition, personality also seemed to play an important role in how the subjects viewed their English language proficiency. The majority of respondents reported that they believed they would be able to communicate better in English if their personalities were not so different from that of an idealized language learner. Most also agreed that their personality characteristics of shyness, humbleness and reservedness, most of which, as Barnlund (1975, p.56) observed, are considered to be national traits in Japan, were additional impediments.

4. Conclusion and Future Implications

There appears to be a positive correlation between Japanese EFL education and the language learner's beliefs as demonstrated in Tables 1 and 2, with respondents indicating that a lack of proper education at the beginning level of their EFL education continued to affect them negatively in their later pursuit of English language fluency. Specifically, respondents commented that the methodology adopted by junior and senior high school teachers left them unable to speak English, and left them unable to develop their listening skills. Moreover, "correctness" is highly valued as a goal. In "Beyond English conversation" (1981, pp.4-10), Ogawa identifies the pursuit of accuracy as one of the factors which hinders language learners from using English freely, and adds that in Asian countries, this tendency appears most strongly in Japanese people. This, in turn, affects the learners psychologically, causing them to be anxious and fearful about not speaking correctly with native speakers and of not being able to understand them.

Although educational methodology and policy may seem a likely cause, it must be remembered that personality also plays a large role in the perceived success of the language learner. The fact that most Japanese revere the characteristics of formality, reservedness, and humbleness, more often than not prevents them from actively participating in English conversations. This problem is intensified in the context of contrasting pressures towards striving for unrealistic norms of correct/ fluent English and the perception that such fluency is regarded as an affectation (Saito et al., 2000, p.55).

In my view, language distance (not only linguistic factors but cultural beliefs and values) is also a key factor.

In this context, it is not surprising that many Japanese EFL learners feel insecure as a result of encountering significant learning difficulties. In addition, the

common perception that competence in English should be placed on a pedestal and is practically unattainable proves a further impediment.

It would appear, therefore, that the important components of teaching English in Japan include not only a significant change in the current methodology towards a broader approach which would include listening and speaking skills, but also some way of reinforcing positive beliefs about ones' abilities and self-esteem. There is the remaining question, however, of whether is it primarily the fault of the Japanese education system or the learners' own beliefs regarding their ability and self-esteem which causes hesitancy in communicating in English. The subjects in the current study believe the cause to be the educational system. This is supported by the fact that, as Tanabe (2003, pp.1-60) points out, for over 30 years the shortcomings of EFL education in Japan have been the subject of continuous public debate. However, from the data in Table 1 and 2, it is not necessarily so clear-cut. Continued study of these two factors is therefore needed before definite conclusions can be drawn. In addition, the results here suggest that ongoing research into the self-perception of language learners is needed in order to create an appropriate environment for language learning. For these reasons, we are currently conducting a larger quantitative research involving 1,299 university students, in which we will discuss the phase of *World Englishes*.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

This is a survey on impediments in L2 acquisition.

I would greatly appreciate your cooperation in answering these questions regarding your experiences in learning English.

Age (please circle) : 20's 30's 40's 50's

Sex : F M

1. Where did you learn (or are you learning) English ?
2. How long have you been studying English ?
3. What was (or is) your motivation for learning English ?
4. How long have you lived in any countries where English is spoken ?
5. What are your poorest areas in English (circle all that apply) ?
Speaking Listening Reading Writing Grammar
6. As for your speaking ability, what factors hindered (or are hindering) you from improving your communication skills in English ? Please choose three items from below.

Linguistic Factors : grammar vocabulary pronunciation

Cultural Factors : cultural difference

Educational Factors : material EFL teacher methodology

Psychological Factors : anxiety fear personality

Example :

1. Linguistic-grammar. One of the most commonplace problems I faced was responding to negative yes-no questions. This often happens because English and Japanese are structurally different in this respect.
Please use other side to answer.

Appendix 2

Supplementary findings

Other findings of this study may be summarized, and broken down as follows :

- 1 . Most learners believe that pronunciation is one of the most important factors inhibiting English language learning. Two subjects agreed that they still had difficulty pronouncing some English vowels and consonants, which do not occur in Japanese : for example, the distinction between [l] and [r]. Moreover, 8 subjects believe that they would be proud of their speaking ability if they could pronounce English well.
- 2 . Most respondents experience low self-esteem when they speak English, making such comments as: “native speakers’ confused reactions, discomfort and frequent requests for me to repeat what I am saying are very discouraging” or, “Because of lack of listening ability, one can’t give a prompt and relevant reply. When one replies, sometimes it is out of focus or not to the point, and a communication breakdown occurs.”
- 3 . Many learners believe that their personality negatively influences their language learning. One subject explained that he tried to change his personality to suit an English communication style by adopting exaggerated gestures when he spoke in English when he was first learning English conversation in the U. S., but as he became accustomed to speaking English he found that he was becoming passive just as when speaking Japanese. Most other subjects agreed that their personality characteristics of shyness, humbleness and reservedness were impediments to learning English.
- 4 . Most learners believe that their poorest areas are in speaking and listening, making such comments as, “These skills were not taught officially in school, and I could not find any appropriate strategy to improve them” and, “If my listening skills were better, I would be able to make more timely and appropriate responses.”
- 5 . Many learners are critical about traditional Japanese education, making such comments as, “Teachers have no ability to give their students oral lessons correctly, because English teachers at public schools in Japan are selected only according to the number of points they achieve on a paper exam and they have very few opportunities to improve their English skills in English speaking countries after getting a job.” On teaching priorities another respondent commented, “Teaching methods commonly employed in Japan are not useful for developing applicable and practical communication skills. The teacher’s final goal is to prepare the students for the written university examination.”
- 6 . Respondents considered another impediment to communication to be lack of vocabulary. One

remarked, for example, “Vocabulary, vernacular and slang are problems in social situations requiring interaction with many American friends which I am not very good at doing.” Other comments in this area included: “When I face a word I’m not familiar with, my thought stops there and I have a hard time following the context of what is said afterwards”; “I have enough passive vocabulary, but it does not work as an active one” and, ‘Idioms are complicated. Even if I figure out the meanings of idioms used in conversation, I don’t feel free to use them myself unless I have internalized them completely, for fear of using one that does not make any sense.’

7. Respondents also consider cultural difference to be an impediment to language learning. Comments regarding this aspect included, “The conversation dries up soon when I’m speaking with someone whom I meet for the first time at a party or something like that, since we don’t have any common topics which we could easily find if we were from the same background,” and, “Certain societies have their own ways of initiating and closing conversations. Due to the fact that this ritual is so different from one country to another, foreigners may feel embarrassed about not adopting appropriate strategies, and consequently prefer to stay quiet in the company of speakers.”