Why assertive communication skills are important?

Why Assertive Communication Skills are Important?

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When asked, many Japanese tend to mention their lack of English skills as a main reason for not being able to communicate with people from different cultures. It is very common to hear the phrase "日本人は英語に弱いね" (Japanese are poor in English) from both the English teachers who are trying to explain cross-cultural misunderstandings in Japan and the Japanese who feel uncomfortable when talking in English. This study has examined if poor English skills are really the major cause of communication failures during interactions with English speaking foreigners.

Up to date, a number of studies have investigated the relationship between anxiety and communication apprehension (McCroskey 1970, McCroskey & Beatty, 1984) as well as language anxiety and oral communication performance in a foreign language (Brown, 1973; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Although it is still not known if the anxiety negatively influences spoken language skills or poor language skills cause anxiety, there seems to be consensus among academicians that there is a close relationship between language skills and anxiety. Bearing this in mind, the Japanese government has been recently shifting the focus from grammar-translation methods to oral and communicative English practices (Nishida, 1985; Yashima, 2002). On the other hand, the fact that the majority of human communication is based on nonverbal cues which mostly are universal (Mehrabian, 1968; Birdwhistell, 1970; Buck, 1988) and assertiveness in one's own culture might be reflected on his/her cross-cultural interactions, made the author of this paper wonder if

the role of foreign language skills is exaggerated in Japan leaving little room for assertive communication training.

Past studies pointed out that there are several other factors contributing to cross-cultural competence besides language: posture, empathy, interaction management, tolerance for ambiguity, dealing with stress and etc. (Ruben 1976; Nishida, 1985; Hammer et al., 1978). However, no study has yet to measure and compare the effects of assertive communication skills and language ability on cross-cultural communication anxiety at the same time. More importantly, we don't know much about the impact of local communication skills when it comes to communicating with foreigners. This study aims to answer these questions and close the literature gap by shedding light on the primacy of assertive communication skills versus verbal communication ability.

Methodology and Analysis

The data was collected at a private university in Kansai via an online questionnaire during the 3rd week of December, 2009. Convenience sampling was used to reach the participants who were registered in an introductory level English class. A total of 35 students successfully completed the survey and gender distribution was skewed toward females (13 males and 22 females). All participants earned an extra class credit for their participation and answered the questionnaire which included demographic questions, self reported English ability items, interpersonal communications skills inventory (Pickett, 1997) and the questions related with anxiety felt when talking to foreigners.

As an initial step, "language skills" scores were calculated for each subject by combining -self reported- speaking, listening, reading and writing evaluations. Cross-cultural communication anxiety, which in this study refers to the anxiety experienced when talking to English speaking foreigners, was computed by taking the average of the answers given to these three questions: "How nervous do you get when talking to English speaking foreigners?", "You avoid situations in which you need to interact with English speaking foreigners," "You cannot talk to Eng-

lish speaking foreigners." During the second stage, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to find underlying groupings in communication inventory followed by a multiple regression procedure analyzing the impact of each factor on cross-cultural communication anxiety. Finally, Pearson correlations were calculated to explore the relationship between the anxiety of talking to foreigners and interpersonal communication inventory items.

Findings and Conclusions

Exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to detect any underlying groupings among the interpersonal communication inventory items. The analysis revealed four major factors with Eigen values larger than 1; namely, "assertive communication", "spontaneous communication", "confident communication", "clear communication". The factors explained about 68.7 % of the common variance in the data set and also yielded statistically significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity values (Chi-Square=237.8). See Appendix I-II.

As a second step, a standard multiple regression analysis was performed where cross-cultural communication anxiety was the dependent variable predicted by English skills and interpersonal communication skills (factors that were saved as variables during the initial factor analysis procedure). The model was significant ($F(5, 33)=5.9$, $p<.01$) and all of the variables had .25 or higher beta values. As suspected, the regression coefficient of "language skills" ($ß_{language}=.35$, $p<.05$) was lower than "assertive communication skills" factor ($ß_{assertive}=.39$, $p<.05$) suggesting that language skills are less important than the interpersonal communication skills (See Table I). To confirm these findings, an additional stepwise regression analysis was run by entering the language skills first into the equation and checking the F and variance changes for each independent variable. Once again, assertive communication skills explained more variance and had a higher F change in the model (See Table II). Thus, it was concluded that interpersonal communication skills is more important than English skills when it comes to communi-

Table I Standard Multiple Regressions Coefficients (a)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	B	
1	(Constant)	5.621	.448		12.551	.000
	Language Ability	-.131	.053	-.348	-2.485	.019
	Assertive Comm.	-.523	.179	-.386	-2.913	.007
	Confident Comm.	.340	.182	.251	1.865	.073
	Clear Comm.	-.439	.185	-.324	-2.368	.025
	Spontaneous Comm.	-.385	.179	-.284	-2.152	.040

a Dependent Variable: Level of Anxiety When Talking to Foreigners

Table II ANOVA(b)

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	31.132	5	6.226	5.913	.001(a)
	Residual	29.486	28	1.053		
	Total	60.618	33			

a Predictors: (Constant), Spontaneous Comm., Clear Comm., Confident Comm., Assertive Comm., Language Ability
b Dependent Variable: Level of Anxiety of Talking to Foreigners

Table III Stepwise Regression Model Summary

Model	Change Statistics						
	R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change	R Square Change	df1	df2	Sig.
1	.341(a)	.116	.116	4.218	1	32	.048
2	.516(b)	.266	.149	6.310	1	31	.017
3	.611(c)	.374	.108	5.166	1	30	.030
4	.673(d)	.453	.079	4.211	1	29	.049

a Predictors: (Constant), Language Ability
b Predictors: (Constant), Language Ability, Assertive Comm.
c Predictors: (Constant), Language Ability, Assertive Comm., Clear Comm.
d Predictors: (Constant), Language Ability, Assertive Comm., Clear Comm., Spontaneous Comm.

cating with English speaking foreigners.

Lastly, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for the relationship between cross-cultural communication anxiety and communication skills inventory items. Surprisingly, "the fear of making mistake" had the highest correlation with the anxiety felt during cross-cultural interactions (See Table IV).

Discussions

The findings have implied that both English skills and assertive communication skills contribute to cross-cultural communication anxiety. However, assertive communication skills seem to be crucial in predicting the anxiety level during cross-cultural encounters. In other words, one who has mediocre English skills can still start and maintain meaningful communication with foreigners if he/she has decent interpersonal communication skills in Japanese society. By the same token, someone who has satisfactory English skills might still fail or feel very uncomfortable when interacting with foreigners if he/she has below average Japanese interpersonal skills. These findings are in line with the proposition that 65% of human communication is non-verbal (Birdwhistell, 1970) and display of basic nonverbal emotions is universal (Buck, 1988). To summarize, people who are warm, friendly, open and able to cop with conflict and ambiguity are likely to be good at communicating with foreigners whereas the opposite is true for others who are incompetent communicators in their own culture.

Additionally, this study has accidentally discovered a different aspect of cross-cultural communication anxiety in Japan which might be the root cause of the problem. The highest correlation coefficient for low anxiety, which is listed as "making a mistake" in Table IV, was actually "apologizing" according to the original scale. Since apologizing（謝る）and making a mistake（誤る）sound the same but are written differently in Japanese, we ended up listing this item in the questionnaire erroneously. It turned out that this item had the highest correlation coefficient among all 21 variables predicting anxiety suggesting that

people who are comfortable in making mistakes in Japanese society can successfully connect with English speaking foreigners regardless of their poor English skills. Although this was an unexpected finding, it makes perfect sense that the fear of making a mistake is the biggest problem in Japan –one of the most risk avoiding countries in the world – considering that each sentence of a non-native speaker may contain a grammatical or phonetic mistake. To prevent the detrimental effects of the fear of making a mistake, we should educate the students that the whole idea of language is to communicate and communication is not a math problem where there is only one correct answer. The students should also be made aware that if they don't engage in conversations with foreigners fearing that they will make a mistake, practically they will never have a chance to improve their speaking skills.

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Appendixes

Appendix I KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.694
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	237.760
	df	91
	Sig.	.000

Appendix II Rotated Component Matrix(a)

	Component			
	Assertive Comm.	Confident Comm.	Clear Comm.	Spontaneous Comm.
Starting a conversation with strangers	0.832			
Saying no	0.73			
Asking questions	0.702			
Stating an unpopular opinion	0.61			
Accepting a compliment	0.513			
Stating what you want		0.746		
Standing up for your rights		0.746		
Giving instruction		0.733		
Giving a compliment		0.604	0.631	
Giving criticism			0.7	
Making Mistake			0.676	
Asking for a favor			0.582	
Dealing with conflict	0.581			0.585
Handling anger				0.875

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Appendix IV Correlations between <u>Anxiety of talking to Foreigners and</u> Assertiveness items

(Comfortable with)	Correlation oefficient	Significance
Making a mistake	-0.52	p<.05
Giving criticism	-0.42	p<.05
Asking Questions	-0.38	p<.05
Starting a conversation w. strangers	-0.36	p<.05
Asking for a favor	-0.36	p<.05
Dealing with conflict	-0.34	p<.05
Language Skills Total	-0.34	p<.05
Reading Skills	-0.32	p>.05
Writing Skills	-0.25	p>.05
Speaking Skills	-0.25	p>.05
Handling anger	-0.21	p>.05
Accepting a compliment	-0.21	p>.05
Stating an unpopular opinion	-0.20	p>.05
Saying no	-0.20	p>.05
Gender (Female=2)	-0.19	p>.05
Giving instruction	-0.19	p>.05
Stating what you want	-0.19	p>.05
Listening Skills	-0.16	p>.05
Giving a compliment	-0.11	p>.05
TOEIC Score	-0.11	p>.05
Standing up for your rights	0.09	p>.05

N=35