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The positive effect of conference participation on reducing L2 communication apprehension

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the socio-psychological and interpersonal process by which Japanese college students majoring in nursing reduced their levels of communication apprehension and eventually enhanced the level of willingness to communicate through their experiences of volunteering as interns at an international conference. Data were obtained from a focus group meeting of nine Japanese students who volunteered to work as interns at an international conference. An approximately 120-minute meeting was audio-recorded and transcribed. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the transcribed data were coded into meaningful units, which were then categorized into concepts representing the participants' sociological and psychological outlook on communication. The results reveal that participation as an intern at an international conference can reduce the level of communication apprehension and suggest that the Japanese sense of self, manifested socially as 'other-directedness', might actually be re-directed in a positive way leading to more effective L2 communication strategies.

1. Introduction

In this global society, English has become an international 'lingua franca' and is regarded as a necessary language for being a member of the international community. Since lingua franca English does not exist as a system but is situated socially, as Canagarajah (2007) points out, learners should be aware of the importance of socio-cultural factors in communication behaviors. In reality, a high degree of communication apprehension has generated the lower level of willingness to communicate and consequently impeded the communicative competence among even highly motivated and hardworking Japanese learners of English. Based on the belief that language should exist as a local practice (Pennycook, 2010), language as a static system may fail to function in the social life; in other words, the learner with sufficient proficiency in English but with a high degree of communication apprehension is prone not to be able to be situated in English-speaking context.

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Communication apprehension, the psychological construct defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78), has been identified as the strongest factor in reducing the level of willingness to communicate among Japanese college students (Matsuoka, 2006, 2009). Communication apprehension is also identified as a psychological phenomenon called social anxiety, though social anxiety covers a wider area of human behaviors. People experience this social anxiety whilst speaking in front of others as Young (1991) has observed. Accordingly, communication apprehension is likely to be a primary reason for the avoidance or disruption of communication.

In cross-cultural communication apprehension research (Klopf, 1984), the Japanese were shown to be significantly more apprehensive than all other groups in the Pacific basin: Americans, Australians, Koreans, Micronesian, Chinese and Filipinos. The high levels of communication apprehension may be regarded as one of the main causes for lowering the communicative competence in English. Therefore, efforts in reducing communication apprehension should raise the level of willingness of communicate and eventually enhance the communication behavior in English. As a number of nursing professionals work overseas as a part of international health aid (IMCJ, 2004) and nursing students are eager to be active overseas in their future careers, it seems crucial to find the mechanism which reduces communication apprehension that has impeded them from effective communication. In fact, when the first author visited Cambodia for a conference, the hotel staff who can speak good English after learning it for only one year asked why the Japanese people cannot speak English even though they are smart enough to develop advanced devices. She explained the possible socio-anthropological factors leading to their low communication competence.

Some literature (McCrosky, Gudykunst, & Nishide, 1984) revealed that Japanese learners of English projected high communication apprehension not only in English but also in their mother tongue, which might be caused by socio-anthropological factors. In the similar way, Berger and McCroskey (2004) reported that a great number of pharmacy students have high communication apprehension and a program developed for reducing their high communication apprehension turned out to be effective.

In this study, using a qualitative content analysis approach, meaningful codes or units were elicited and categorized into concepts which seem able to explain the Japanese sense of self. These categorized concepts may explain the core mentality of Japanese learners or Japanese sense of self in describing the relevant data derived from the focus group meeting and the individual interviews enforced by participant observations.

The focal point of this study is to find out the way in which the experiences of being interns at an international conference were successful in reducing the levels of communication apprehension of serious learners of English, based on the data which may reveal the Japanese socio-cultural features embedded in their mental mechanism.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Nine students majoring nursing at the national college participated in this study. From more than 400 students at a nursing college, they volunteered to help the conference as an intern. The announcement calling for this was posted on students' bulletin board and sent to all students via email text message individually. Approximately twenty students showed their interest but for logistic reasons such as other appointment, more than ten students were unable to participate. Because the mission of the college if for working as nurse globally, a great number of students are motivated in improving their English communication skills, and seek possible opportunities involving any activities using English. However, there are important examinations and nursing practices in the month of November; as a result, only nine students decided to help at the international conference held in Tokyo as interns for three days in November in 2008. Although the conference was held in Tokyo, approximately seventy to eighty participants dwere

native speakers of English, and the participants of this study were exposed to English-speaking environment and were expected to use English during the conference sessions.

As Table 1 indicates, five of them were female and four male. Five (three: female; two: male) were the third year students, whose ages ranged from 20 to 21; four (two: female; two; male) were the first year students whose ages ranged from 18 to 19. Their average age was 19.67.

Table 1: Participants

	Female	Male	Total
1st year	2	2	4
3rd year	3	2	5
Total	5	4	9

As Table 2 indicates, four participants (E, F, G, and H) out of five third year students volunteered to work as interns at the same international conference in 2007, so they knew, to a certain degree, what they were expected to do.

One first year female student (C) was a returnee and lived in the UK for two years while her father conducted his research in dentistry; the other first year female student (D) was not a returnee but her aunt is a professional interpreter who travels overseas frequently and has given her motivation to learn English.

One of the first year male students (B) was from a high school designated as a 'super English language high school' where almost all of the English teachers were native speakers, and around third of the students were so-called regular students who have no rigorous foreign experiences. The other first year male student (A) was from one of the top high schools where English education is highlighted confessed that he had a high degree of anxiety or apprehension in speaking English.

All three female third year students (G, H, and I) had some experiences of traveling overseas and are interested in international nursing. Participant G went to Kenya during the summer holidays when she was second year student. She talked about many interesting things about people in Kenya while helping the people there as a volunteer. She said they may have been caused by the different cultures. She also said that she learned a lot from even the negative experiences there. It must be noted that her English is not flawless but functioned sufficiently when she helped as an intern in the previous year and one of the conference committee members asked me to ask her to participate in it again as she was very helpful. Her experience in Kenya helped her to use her English in an efficient way. Participant H, who is very fond of English, went to Bali with her high school friends when she was also a second year student. She said she used a package tour and had less opportunity in speaking English and limited time of speaking to local people, which she regretted a lot. She searched for any occasion of using English and she said she decided to volunteer as an intern again after doing so in the previous year. Participant I went to India in the spring holidays before she became a third year. She said she enjoyed the stay there including local food and drink and that she made friends with an American with whom she has communicated via email. Her English is one of the best in this college.

One of two third year male students (E), whose father is an English teacher, pronounces English near native-like though he has never been abroad and did not have any experiences of contacting native speakers. The other third year male student (F) is not eager to learn English but is always helpful, and his English worked well enough for the communication with English speaking attendees. Table 2 below shows the participants' rough backgrounds gained from interviews and observation.

Table 2: Participants' backgrounds

ID	Gender	Year	Age	English proficiency	Intern experience	Overseas experience	Remarks
A	Male	1st	18	Intermediate	None	None	From the local top high school
B	Male	1st	18	Advanced	None	School trip to Korea	From Super English high school
C	Female	1st	19	Advanced	None	Lived in the UK	Her father did research in the UK.
D	Female	1st	19	Lower advanced	None	None	her aunt is an English translator
E	Male	3rd	20	Lower advanced	Yes	None	His father is an English teacher
F	Male	3rd	21	Intermediate	Yes	None	Sociable and outgoing personality
G	Female	3rd	21	Lower advanced	Yes	Visited Kenya	Plans to work overseas as nurse
H	Female	3rd	21	Advanced	Yes	Visited Indonesia	Hardworking
I	Female	3rd	21	Advanced	None	Visited India	Has an English-speaking friend

2.2 Procedure

Nine participants joined a 120-minute meeting, and the conversation there was audio-recorded and transcribed. The questions asked at this meeting included a) whether they had noticed any changes in their communication behaviors in English, b) what sorts of difficulties or problems they had during the conference sessions, and c) how they felt when speaking English. In a relaxed condition with food and drinks, they were expected to express their feelings, reflecting their experiences. Data from participation observation and individual interviews were also used in order to reduce the gap the real feelings and their said feelings in the meeting.

2.3 Qualitative content analysis approach

Bernard Berelson (1952), the initiator of content analysis, defined content analysis as 'a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of communications', and it has been used to determine the presence of certain words, concepts, themes, phrases, character, or sentences within texts. However, more recent literature (Weber, 1990) has included qualitative description without quantification using numbers, which the present study uses. It may also need to be noted that other sources from participation observation and individual interviews are used for analysis for this study, in order not to fall into reductionism and to do an emic analysis where available.

  Content analysis is the research method making valid inferences from the text (Weber, 1990). In order to make valid inferences, Krippendorff (2004) postulates that the following six points need to be addressed; a) data, b) definition of the data, c) the population of the data d) context, e) the boundaries, and f) the target of the inferences.

The data for this present study were the transcribed text of the conversation at the focus-group meeting and individual interviews, and were defined as the experiences as interns at the international conference. The population for the data was the Japanese college students who are eager to improve their communication competence in English though they have different degree of eagerness. The context was the international conference where the participants helped as interns. The boundary of analysis exists in the contents affecting the participants' communication behaviors in English. Lastly the target of the inferences was to explore the socio-psychological mechanism of reducing the level of Japanese learners' communication apprehension.

The inferences are made through coding in order that the latent meanings should be elicited from manifest contents. Then the elicited codes are categorized or subsumed into viable factors.

3. Findings and Discussion

The codes elicited from the data are classified as negative, positive, and strategic according to the nature of each code. The negative codes are mainly from the participants' reflections leading to the negative effects on their communication behaviors in English, and the positive codes are produced from overcoming the difficulties projected as negative codes. The last classified codes are named as strategic as they can function of moving forward to the better communicator in reducing the level of communication apprehension.

3.1 Negative codes

The negative codes are subsumed into competitiveness and perfectionism, both of which are thought to be led by 'other-directedness'.

3.1.1 Competitiveness

Some negative codes leading to the concept of 'competitiveness' were elicited from the conversation with good speakers of English, as Bailey (1983) reports from the dairy data. The code [to be afraid of being evaluated as a poor speaker of English], was elicited from many participants' reflections. Because all of the participants have been serious students and hard workers, they are more conscious of the other person's evaluation. It is also possible that they have been serious students and hard workers because they are more conscious of the other person's evaluation.

Interestingly, a returnee student C confessed that she was overly conscious of her English when she was with another intern who is great in speaking English. She emphasized that her communication apprehension became higher when talking in front of this student. Knowing that she is a returnee and almost native-like speaker, I was surprised to hear what she said and kept on asking why she thinks she was nervous. She said she was more conscious of Japanese speakers of English, adding that she did not feel uncomfortable in speaking English with native speakers.

The similar reflection was made by the participant B in Table 2 who is from Super English Language High School said that he was overly conscious of speaking English when sitting between two seemingly professional interpreters (Japanese) at the information desk where he was assigned to help the conference participants. He (B) said that hearing good English spoken by two ladies sitting in his both sides made him nervous in speaking English and more conscious in doing so. Both of them said that it took some time to get over this anxiety but once they learned strategies in controlling their mindsets they felt more comfortable and confident in speaking English. From these two participants, the code of [to be overly conscious of other Japanese speakers of English] was elicited. This code can be subsumed into the notion of 'competitiveness'.

3.1.2 Perfectionism

Another code [to try to complete English sentences] is from the girl (D in Table 2) who also helped in the equipment section. She said that at first she tried to give a complete English sentence in clarifying the presenter's needs but the interaction did not work well against her expectation. So she started to focus on content words and the communication went smoothly. The same code is also found from the boy (A in Table 2) who says he has been always trying to make complete English sentences and failed to express himself in time. He says that he has an inferiority complex in speaking English, and his efforts in completing English sentences seem not to have worked. This feature can be subsumed into 'perfectionism', and also indicated the relationship of learners and learning contexts as Norton (2000) points out. The participant D said that the situation of requiring her quick response did not allow her to take time in completing the grammatically correct sentence, and she learned how to negotiate her language resources. The participant G, on the other hand, with some overseas experience said that she was already aware that tying to make complete sentences in speaking is not useful in communication behaviors, which has been also discussed in other studies (e.g., Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

3.1.3 Other-directedness

These concepts are accordingly categorized into a viable factor of 'other-directedness' that are projected as competitiveness and perfectionism, as indicated in prior studies (e.g., Matsuoka, 2006, 2009). The notion of 'other-directedness' was based on two sources; one is Kuwayama (1994) who argues that Japanese sense of self is embedded in the reference other orientation because it is relational, interactional, interdependent, situational, contextual, relative, collective, group-oriented, and socio-centered, and the other is Lebra (2004) who postulates that Japanese people sense their self as 'subject I' – the unique individual self – and as 'object me' – the social self, which is affected by others. Lebra (2004) quoted Athen's 'soliloquy' as the self, from George Mead who asserts that self emerges only through the internalization of others' perspectives and expectations by linking two sides of self, self as subject I and self as object me. As George Mead did not limit this nature to the Japanese sense of self, all humans should have this sense of self. However, the Japanese society is featured as 'SEKEN', the society or world embedded by people outside, theorized as a particular feature describing the Japanese society (Abe, 2001). The notion of SEKEN has been built up in the Japanese social and cultural context and is thought to be deeply embedded in the Japanese society. However, in actuality, Sato (2002) analogizes SEKEN as 'Lebenswelt: living world', the term in Phenomenology and SEKEN itself may not also be only Japanese character. Still the anecdotal data from Cambodian hotel staff in 2010 suggests that some factors may have impeded Japanese communication behaviors and the data of this study imply that the socio-cultural feature of this so-called 'other directedness' may have caused this.

3.2 Positive codes

Several meaningful positive codes elicited from the data seem to work on reducing the communication apprehension levels. They may lead to the concept of 'self-efficacy' (Bandura, 1997).

  The frequent codes from the participants were [to gain many more opportunities to use English than in their usual lives], [to understand the importance of communication even when the communication skills are not good enough], [to gain confidence of speaking English after making themselves understand themselves], and [to feel confident and happy in speaking English]. These codes are in clear contrast to negative codes, which revealed 'other-directedness' i.e., the Japanese overly conscious mentality toward outside world, or other people (Kuwayama, 1992; Lebra, 2004, Maynard, 1997), these elicited codes may build up their 'self-efficacy', reducing their communication apprehension levels.

3.2.1 Gaining opportunities of using English

The first code [to gain many more opportunities to use English than in their usual lives] is based on the factual experiences that they had during the conference sessions, and this code was heard many times from all nine participants. Participants E and F in Table 2, in particular, expressed their happy feelings when they had many opportunities to use English compared with when they sat behind the backstage working as a tech intern which does not require communication with native speakers, which may lead to the third code in this category. Participant E does not look sociable and outgoing from my observation though he can command good English with good pronunciation. Participant F is a sociable and outgoing but he seemed to have avoided the occasion of using English from his lack of confidence in English competence. Therefore, what they said surprised me, and this may function effectively for reducing the level of communication apprehension, which indicates that conference participation affected the participants effectively. Through gaining many opportunities to communicate, people feel more confident and comfortable and less apprehensive in communication behaviors, as shown in the program for pharmacy students (Berger and McCroskey, 1982).

3.2.2 Understanding the importance of communication

The second code [to understand the importance of communication even when the communication skills are not good enough] is a cognitive one generated from their own experiences in an effort of overcoming being an unnecessary perfectionist, the nature of which might partly be attributed from other-directedness as mentioned earlier. The Japanese education may have encouraged a negative evaluation for students in such a way that they have been criticized negatively when they make any errors in their school days instead of being admired positively. Consequently, they are afraid of making errors and have tried unnecessarily to make a perfect sentence even in their oral communication. It seems that this attitude may have discouraged Japanese people from expressing themselves in English even when they are supposed to. The code here indicates the process by which the participants B, D, F, and H in Table 2 conquered the impeding mentality for communication. They confessed that trying to be perfect did not work in case of helping the attendees at the conference sites, and the motivation of helping them facilitated them to communicate with them without hesitation, which may show the nature of language as a local practice (Pennycook, 2010). In the classroom settings as well, provided by Gergersen and Horowitz (2002), perfectionism turned out to be an impeding factor for the learners' oral communication behaviors, though the real language use is outside of the classroom as Norton (2000) points out.

3.2.3 Gaining confidence of speaking English

The third code [to gain confidence of speaking English after making themselves understand themselves] comes from the participants who experienced the second code. The participant H, in particular, confessed that she felt confident in speaking English and this confidence made her more communicative competent, comparing her previous year's experience when she volunteered as an intern of just organizing the line of registration which did not require impromptu communication. In the different context, the participants G and I in Table 2 shared their experiences overseas. As described earlier, the participant G went to Kenya when she was a 2nd year student, and through this experience she said she learned how important to try to communicate in English overseas and gained confidence of speaking English after managing to make herself understand herself during the difficult trip to Kenya and stay there. Participant I went to India and she encountered an English speaking friend on board. As also stated earlier, she continued the email communication with him, and added that email text communication is different from oral communication but prompt email exchanges which is similar to oral communication is vital to keep their friendship going. She said she felt more confident in each email exchange. Through these positive experiences they had, they

ascertained the importance of communication, and their confidence in communication became stronger through this experience at the conference.

3.2.4 Feeling confident and happy

The fourth one [to feel confident and happy in speaking English] is closely related to the third code; the participants experienced happy feelings after being confident in speaking English in general. These experiences obviously have led to reducing their communication apprehension. Once the learners have a chance of feeling positively in speaking English, they are naturally more willing to communicate, based on both observation and interview data. During the conference sessions, the participants H and I in Table 2 were invited by the conference committee members, all of whom are native English speakers, and had the chance of eating dinner together. They confessed that they had a happy time with them while eating dinner and talking in English. They said this experience encouraged them to speak out and to build up their confidence in speaking English.

3.2.5 Self efficacy

These four codes seem to lead to a viable factor of 'self efficacy of speaking English' (Bandula, 1997), which should function effectively for Japanese learners in reducing their communication apprehension levels and enhancing their willingness to communicate levels.

3.3 Strategic codes

In addition to negative and positive codes, they provided dynamic and constructive codes which seem to be useful and helpful as pedagogical implications. The participants talked about the in-depth mentality in the process of developing their oral communication skills. Let me call them strategic codes.

3.3.1 Compromise

The first code given by them is [to compromise oneself in using English instead of trying to reach their idealized expectations. They, the participants B and C in Table 2, in particular, discussed the differences between English as subject and English as communication, and they argued that they have to compromise themselves in order to make their English resources usable in the real communication settings. What they noticed from their experiences during the conference sessions seem to be closely related to the features of languages both Norton (2000) and Pennycook (2010) argue; that is, we should notice the relationship between language learners and social world where that language is in use, and the language is located in the given space in a dynamic way and in the historical time.

3.3.2 Adjustment

The second code elicited from them was [to adjust oneself in the given context]. Communication is the bilateral relations of interlocutors, and in the process of interacting with the other party we need to adjust ourselves in the given context using our possessed resources. Participant A and C, again here, discussed the interesting features of discourse in our social life, and their points may fit the notion of language as the social instead of the individual in Pennycook (2010). These participants seem to regard language as a local practice.

3.3.3 Cut and try

The third code [to cut and try/ to test and fault] was suggested by the participants A and B. Even if the trial does not work, we can try it again by modifying it a little. They said that by doing so they started to feel more confident in speaking English during the conference sessions. Once they tried to do so, they learned how to modify their language and felt less apprehensive in talking.

3.3.4 Using resources

The fourth one was [to use one's resources in the optimal way]. Almost all the participants said that it was great when some expressions they were not sure about worked well in a real communication site. Then they said that they gained sufficient courage in trying other resources again in the different context. By doing so, they had more opportunities in using English, and each time they felt more confident.

3.3.5 Strategy

These codes, elicited from successful learners of English, are categorized into a viable concept of 'strategy'.

4. Concluding remarks

The results of the present study elicited from the data indicate that the participation as an intern at the international conference can reduce the levels of communication apprehension and enhance the levels of willingness to communicate, and suggest that the Japanese sense of self manifested as the mentality of 'other-directedness' could be overcome should the optimal occasions of using English and experiencing the self-efficacy be given. Lastly the participants for this study who experienced the modification in their inner mechanism of their sense of self provided the valuable implications which will be useful in our pedagogy. The codes derived from their talk seem to be more rigorous as they are from language learners themselves.

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