

(Note)

Japanese English Language Learners: Deficiency in Confidence

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Keywords

Educational comparison EFL in Japan Japanese university students

Introduction

Having taught English at many levels, including kindergarten, elementary school, junior and senior high school, and university over the past ten years in the Tokyo area, the what now seems to be a redundant question of why the Japanese are 'not good' at English despite the abundance of language schools offering English lessons, it being a compulsory subject in junior and senior high school, and that most university curricula require some sort of English study during the first year and or second year, needed to be approached from an angle long thought about. The perspective concerns the role of the teacher and the role self-fulfilling prophecy and confidence may play in English language learning in Japan.

Need for study

Affective factors in second language learning sometimes seem to take a backseat, as it were, to the more tangible aspects of second language learning and teaching methodology. With an emphasis on test scores, grammar-translation accuracy, less easy to measure aspects language of learning are sometimes overlooked in English education in Japan. Even with the best teaching methods a teacher will find it difficult to raise the level of a student if that student lacks motivation, goals, or confidence. With this, the notion that Japanese are not confident in communicating in English needed to be investigated. And in this case, was done by comparing a set of Japanese second language learners and set of students from the United States. The focus of the comparison is to try and understand why Japanese students often regard themselves less capable than do their American university counterparts though haven been exposed to the target language longer. First, I will discuss the possible reasons the Japanese students may feel less competent than their counterparts by looking at the Japanese English language classroom and how the 'teacher to student' relationship effects students' self-perception and consequently Japanese students of English confidence levels.

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Teachers' Beliefs

Much research has been done into how teacher's predetermined biases affect their students' academic outcomes. (Brophy, 83; Feldman & Prohaska, 79) Depending on place and circumstance, different teachers have differing expectations of their students. (Feldman & Theis, 80) Predetermined attitudes teachers can affect their students achievement levels. (Tauber, R 98) Teachers at the junior high school level where compulsory English education begins in Japan are often unaware of this in terms of confidence building. Working as an assistant language teacher (ALT) in eight different public junior high schools in Kanagawa prefecture has given me insight into what teacher's expect of their students before classes even begin. First, it must be noted that as with any teacher who has been teaching for any number of years, it is easy to get settled into a patterned way of instruction year after year and not change much in terms of how and what is taught. Thus attitudes and expectations, too can become 'fossilized' to some extent possibly by the time taken away from lesson planning by demands outside the classroom, which diminishes variety or whether it simply be from the teacher's own individual idea about students that have hardened. At the junior high school level, English classes are, as it were, are almost set in stone in terms of content which are narrowly defined, and often uncompromising. (Ryan, 2009) With textbooks being set by the Ministry of Science and Education, teachers are often reluctant to venture outside what prescribed in the textbooks for fear of not adequately preparing their pupils for exams, and too because of time limitations. ALT's are all too often made bluntly aware of this type of thinking and are sometimes told they are not needed for prescheduled lessons because the Japanese teacher of English (JTE) needed to cover a particular page to ensure the textbook was covered completely. This strict adherence to the textbook itself determines what will be covered and more importantly it has a strong influence on what the teacher believes is possible. This is particularly important when considering, not so much the ability, but the lack of confidence many JTE's have in actually teaching English. This confidence issue also leads to the very important point concerning predetermined ideas about students. If a teacher strictly adheres to only the textbook, as many do, and too lack confidence in their own language skills then the messages they send to their pupils can hardly be one of confidence. Simply put, 'If I can't do it, neither can you', is the message being sent. The most apparent way this train of thought is relayed to students is simply by the teacher rarely speaking English. It would be difficult for a student to develop confidence if the teacher doesn't exhibit any.

Students too, may have an affect on one another. It is well-known that most Japanese do not want to stand out in front of their peers and all too often take a very modest outlook when it comes to demonstrating one's abilities or potential. (Bjornsen et. al, 2007) Not only is this attitude usually not characteristic of a good language learner, it may also lead to one believing that they may have little ability of becoming fluent.

Students' Self-Perception

By time a student reaches university, preconceived notions concerning learning English have been engrained in many Japanese English language learners. These preconceived ideas about English come not only from their teachers, but also the general attitude of Japanese society towards English.

One example of a junior high school student's comment in particular demonstrates the anxiety

and prevailing attitude among many of the students at public junior high schools. Once before a classroom of students, a JTE introduced me and said that I would be teaching some portion of the day's lesson. When time came for me to introduce a part of the lesson, a student blurted out, "wakaranai!", or 'I don't understand!', before I had even spoken. I then asked, "nani ga?" or "What is it that you don't understand?" Much of the class laughed at this, which was good to break some of the tension, but it shows the extent to which some students have little expectation of understanding, and too a lack of confidence. (Harumi, 2010) By the time a student has reached university, many carry this lack of confidence with them. Years of constantly saying, 'I can't speak English', to some degree must affect what a person believes of themselves. Compare that with the opposite attitude of a language learner who might always sees the glass as half full instead of half empty, as it were.

Method

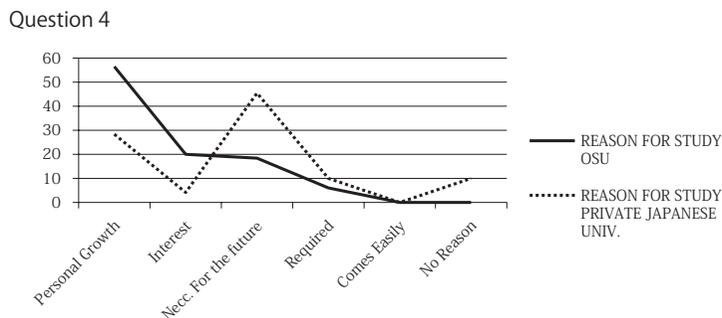
Both sample sets were given a questionnaire asking them to indicate their length of study, level of confidence in the target language, and reason for studying their respective target language. University students at a California State University studying Japanese were asked to complete the questionnaire at the end of a class session at the beginning of their school year. Students from a private university in the Tokyo area were given the same questionnaire and were asked to answer concerning their English ability. These students were given the questionnaire at the end of a class session midway through the school year. The questionnaire used for this comparison was originally written in English and translated into Japanese by two Japanese professors of English. Students from two universities participated in the survey, 100 from each university. They were asked to answer honestly, and quickly about what they believe their own communicative ability in their target language to be.

Participants

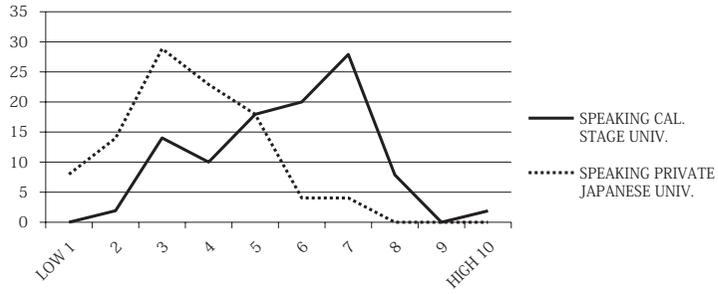
The 100 students surveyed from the California State University had all studied Japanese as a second language for less than 3 years and varied in age and gender. The 100 students from the Japanese university had all studied English as a second language for a minimum of seven years and ranged in age from 18 to 22. Their genders also varied.

Results

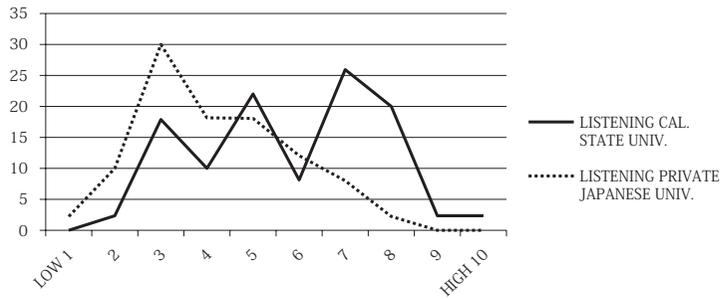
Questionnaires in both English and Japanese can be found in the Appendices, E&J.



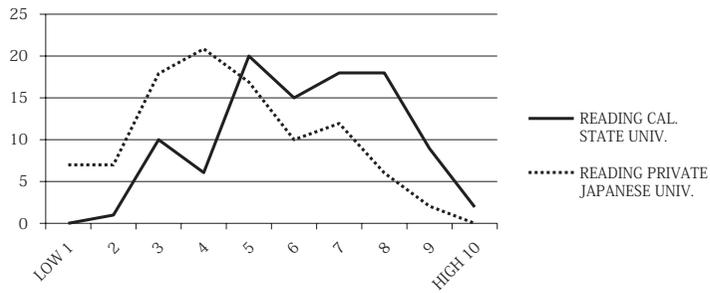
Question 3S



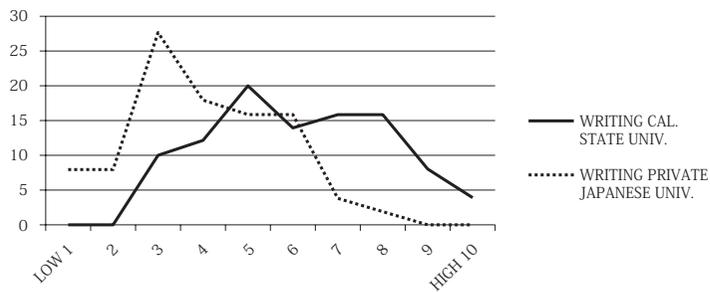
Question 3L



Question 3R



Question 3W



Discussion

An important fact that must be considered when comparing the results of the American universities and the Japanese universities is the length of time the students have studied or been exposed to their particular target language. The Japanese students had all been exposed to English for a minimum of seven years, beginning in junior high school. Of all the students from the California State University campus, none indicated having studied Japanese for more than three years. If one were to consider only the length of time to determine the aptitude, or in this case, the degree of confidence a person would have after studying a foreign language, the Japanese students would be expected to far exceed the CSU students in terms of the confidence as well as aptitude. This, however, was not the case. And what also makes the comparison all the more compelling is the fact that had the questionnaire results had been identical between the groups, the case for length of study should still make one give pause as to why the Japanese students were not more confident than their counterparts.

A second consideration is the reason students chose to study the target language. With question #4 (Appendix E&J), of the questionnaire participants were given six options to choose from concerning their reason for studying their respective target language. It must also be pointed out that though only a small percentage chose the option, the Japanese students in the survey were all required to take English as part of their curriculum. The CSU students, however, may have foreign language requirements, but by no means have the social pressures of studying Japanese as a second language they way the Japanese students have had to study English.

One clear difference between the CSU students and the Japanese students was the indication of 'interest'. The Japanese students indications were markedly lower than the CSU students for personal growth and interest, but much higher when it came to being necessary for the future. Such a high indication in the 'necessary for the future' mark may be indicative of having a sense of duty, or the belief that it is something that 'must' be done.

In terms of the four language skills, the results may not reflect their true communicative ability, but do shed light on their self-perceived level of ability in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. They were asked to indicate their preference on a scale from 1 to 10, (1 indicating the lowest and 10 the highest). Question 3 (Appendix E&J), surveyed the four communication skills; speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The difference in confidence in speaking ability is higher for the CSU students, graph *Question 3S*. This is may be due to several reasons including the fact that the CSU students are not as inhibited to speak and try out, what they know. It may also have to do with the communicative approach used in the classroom where students would be required to use what they learn as they learn it thus maintaining a certain degree of confidence. In any case, chart below shows a clear difference in self-perception in terms of oral ability.

The results of perceived listening ability, *Question 3L*, are probably closest to the actual aptitude of the participants because most language learners are fairly perceptive, when it comes to determining the amount or percentage of how much they are able to understand, if nothing else, by the amount of words that spoken verses the estimated amount they can actually understand. However this may be true, the Japanese students, as they did with their confidence level in speaking tended to mark lower on the 10-1 scale. The CSU students however were more varied in their responses.

Admittedly, it was felt that the Japanese university students would mark similar to, or higher than the CSU students when asked about perceived reading ability, *Question 3R*. As reading is passive skill and requires no production, many Japanese students tend to feel more comfortable with reading than the other three skills. And graph below does show a slightly higher distribution for the Japanese students than the other three, though still not showing the amount of confidence the CSU students indicate, despite having three sets of characters to learn. In both cases though it can be assumed that most if not all of the reading the students are exposed to from the classroom meaning that would be at or just above their actual level.

As with reading the three sets of characters for katakana, hiragana, and kanji the CSU students need to learn, confidence in writing might also be thought to be relatively low. And though their answers varied and showed no significant peak, they were more heavily weighted towards the positive than their Japanese counterparts in *Question 3W*.

As expected, the participants' answers varied even within each group with some participants indicating much higher scores than their peers. The reasons for these wide variances could be attributed to personality, or a many other individual preferences, but the data does show a clear difference in confidence in all four areas of communication. The CSU students may simply be indicating how confident they are with what they already know and not concentrating on the things they don't, as their Japanese counterparts sometimes do.

The Benefits of a Positive Attitude

One trait of a good language learner is having the belief that fluency can be developed through study, and perseverance. The teacher's role in this is to provide enough modeling, positive reinforcement, and level appropriate practice. Of course, the primary motivation for studying a foreign language is influential in how well a second language learner may progress, but confidence in oneself is equally, if not more important. Success can build on success, or "nothing succeeds like success", (Atsuta, 2003) is phrase that all educators should recognize and convey to their students. Students at any level, and more crucially students beginning formal foreign language study need confidence building to ensure a positive learning attitude throughout their length of study.

Conclusion

For the Japanese university students who participated in this survey it was evident that confidence was less than what one might initially expect of a second language learner with over six years of formal study. Reasons for this lack of confidence, as suggested may rest with a cultural sense of modesty, but more importantly the role of the teacher in helping students to develop a way of thinking about learning English that is positive. Developing this positive attitude early is critical. Once a student believes in him or herself, optimism and intrinsic motivation will set in. Conversely, if a student has negative experiences from the beginning of their formal study, it may be difficult to convince them that learning a second language can be a fulfilling endeavor and not a duty. At the university level in particular there is a need to present intriguing models and a chance for students to clearly see their own growth. Once one can see that growth is taking place, confidence will naturally follow.

APPENDIX E

ENGLISH

Please answer the following questionnaire quickly and honestly. Data collected from the following questions will be used expressly for research concerning attitudes of second language learners'.

1. My second language of study is _____.

2. How long have you been studying your 'second' language?

0-6 months 6 mo.~1 year 1~2 years 2~3 years 3~6 years more than 6 years

3. With 10 representing native-like fluency, rate yourself in the four following skills.

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

4. Circle ONE of the following which BEST explains your reason for enrolling in your language course:

It is required for my major	For personal knowledge and growth	It is easy for me
No particular reason	I'm interested in it	I feel it is necessary for my future

APPENDIX J

JAPANESE

以下の質問に、簡単にそして正直にお答えください。これによって集まれたデータは、第二言語学習者に関する調査のためにのみに使用します。

1. 今勉強している第二言語は何ですか _____.

2. 今まで第二言語を勉強している期間を **O** を囲んでください。

0～6ヶ月間 6ヶ月間～1年間 1～2年間 2～3年間 3～6年間 6年間以上

3. ネイティブ スピーカーの言語力を10とした場合、あなたの言語力はどのぐらいだと思いますか。以下の4技能それぞれについてあてはまる数字を **O** で囲んでください。

スピーキング	リスニング	リーディング	ライティング
10	10	10	10
9	9	9	9
8	8	8	8
7	7	7	7
6	6	6	6
5	5	5	5
4	4	4	4
3	3	3	3
2	2	2	2
1	1	1	1

4. 次のうち、あなたが外国語の授業をとる理由として最も合っていると思うものを1つだけ **O** で囲んでください。

専門分野で必要だから 知識を増やし、人間として成長するため（私にとって）楽だから

特に理由なし 内容に関心があるから 将来のために必要だと思うから

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