

The Acquisition of English and the Learner's Attitude

—Motivation vs. Ego Boundary—

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Objective

This paper emphasizes primarily the importance of acquiring a favorable attitude toward foreign language learning as an essential factor in higher achievement.

Other things being equal, cultural and psychological factors have been found to create barriers more crucial than any others against the learner's acquisition of oral production skills. As a language teacher, my major concern has been to try to analyze and predict errors which are peculiar to Japanese learners of English, so as to devise appropriate correction measures.

The Problem

The problem which will be dealt with in this study concerns erroneous responses which Japanese learners of English invariably give to negative and tag questions. The following anecdotal dialogue best illustrates the problem, which does not arise from insufficient acquisition of grammatical or syntactical rules of the target language alone, but can be attributed to a lack of interest in or indifference to learning the foreign language as a means of communication.

An American student asks his Japanese counterpart :

- (1) A : Kenji, which do you like, summer or winter ?
- (2) K : I like summer.

- (3) A : Aha, so you don't like cold winters, then ?
 (4) K : Yes.
 (5) A : Oh ? I thought you said you liked summer better.
 (6) K : Yes, of course.
 (7) A : Now, wait a minute. Make up your mind, Ken.
 You don't like cold winters, do you ?
 (8) K : Yes.
 (9) A : ???

The American student is totally bewildered and wonders whether Kenji does not comprehend what he is being asked or is merely trying to be funny, or both.

The fact is, in English, an answer to a negative or a tag question either affirms or negates the main verb in the question sentence, whereas in Japanese, an answer either affirms or negates the "truth value" of the question sentence as a whole. In other words, Kenji's responses (4) and (8) should be interpreted as, "Yes, you are quite right." Or, "What you have just said is right. I don't like cold winters." If Kenji had given an answer in a full sentence, he might have been able to avoid the confusion. As it is, Kenji is not trying to be funny, but merely responds to the questions in just the same way as he usually does when he is speaking in Japanese. It may sound misleading to speakers of English, but the same is true with speakers of French, Spanish, Chinese and Korean.

Japanese Semantics

Kuno (1983, p. 273) explains that "according to conventional grammars, Japanese *hai* 'yes' and *iie* 'no', as answers to negative questions, correspond to English *no* and *yes*, respectively." According to Martin (1962, pp. 364-365), Japanese 'yes' and 'no' indicate "... 'what you've said is correct' and 'what you've said is incorrect.' " Whereas, English 'yes' and 'no' "...affirm or deny the FACTS rather than the STATEMENT of the facts."

Language Transfer

Kenji in the above dialogue, therefore, can be said to be at the stage of processing what he is hearing through his native language, constantly decoding the questions and encoding his answers back and forth between his first and second language.

The traditional view of second language learners' errors, or of their erroneous and ill-formed discourse, was to consider them as the result of insufficient mastery of the rules of the second language, and to hold that more instruction and practice were needed until these disappeared. However, as early as the mid-1950's, the notion that errors were an indication of the learner's difficulties arising from the differences between the first and second language began to prevail. Lado (1957) explains this phenomenon as the persistence of habits of the mother tongue and their transfer to the new language, which is termed as "negative interlingual transfer" or "native language interference" (Brown, 1980).

The learner's errors, according to the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis in its strong form, are attributed to his first language (Wardhaugh, 1970). Advocators of this hypothesis claimed that second language learning is primarily a process of acquiring whatever items are different from the first language, and that errors could be predicted by comparing or contrasting the two languages and could be corrected by reducing the effects of interference from the first language. On the other hand, the weak hypothesis explains the errors as the evidence of difficulties the learner is experiencing at a particular stage of the process of learning, arguing that comparison between the two languages can help detect the source of errors.

Cultural and Psychological Factors

Judging from the data gathered in actual classroom situations at several universities in the Tokyo area, one can assume that those who fail to learn to respond correctly to negative questions have not really been exposed to situations where real communication takes

place. Those, however, who have had an opportunity to communicate with English speaking people, or to visit foreign countries where English is spoken, seldom make this kind of mistake. This goes to show that without any adequate knowledge of the way of life and thinking of the members of the other linguistic group, as well as the manners and customs of their society, it is difficult to bridge the gap between the linguistic, let alone the cultural divergences.

Furthermore, students who have a strong desire to acquire a foreign language for the purpose of getting to know people who speak the language, or to know more about their country, make fewer mistakes than those who do not share the same desire. In other words, students who have a more favorable attitude toward interacting in oral communication make far better progress. This can be explained in terms of their possession of integrative rather than instrumental motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) being the key to their better achievement. Gardner and Lambert maintain that "the successful learner of a second language must be psychologically prepared to adopt various aspects of behavior which characterize the members of another linguistic-cultural group."

Apparently, the learner's attitude toward members of the other language group, coupled with his or her degree of motivation toward the task of acquisition itself, determines the success in learning the language. It is also suggested by Carroll (1962) that second-language achievement varies as a function of three learner characteristics: aptitude, general intelligence and motivation; and two instructional variables: the opportunity the student has for learning and the adequacy of the presentation or the material to be learned.

Rivers (1986) emphasizes that for the learning of a new language, in addition to a structured sequence or structured activities and inductive or deductive learning, there must be "interaction between people who have *something to share* (my emphasis)" for the purpose of communication of meaning. That is, there must be shared understanding based upon shared cultural and psychological knowledge

and information. She goes on to say that "if effective language learning is to take place, this interaction which involves both comprehension and production must be kept central." This essential dichotomy — oral and aural language skills — inevitably associates with kinesics such as gestures, facial expressions as well as prosodics or suprasegmental aspects of phonetics involving variations in intensity, pitch and timing, which are essential elements in successful communication.

Guiora et al. (1972) emphasize the importance of the role of the more subtle psychological processes involved, i. e., "empathy" — social perceptiveness or sensitivity — which means the ability to empathize with the thoughts and feelings of others.

Psychological Process of Second Language Acquisition

The assumption that the process of first language acquisition is relevant to second language acquisition is rather misleading, because of the great differences between a child learning to speak his or her mother tongue and an adult trying to acquire his or her second or foreign language. The differences in learning environment, pedagogy and learner's cognitive maturation are so great that it is difficult actually to apply the same analytical criteria indiscriminately to the two processes involved.

Politzer (1965) and Brown (1973) maintain that the process of learning a first language is unique and that the learning of a second language is a very different process. Some errors occurring in the comprehension and production of the second language can be expected and explained by the special structure of the language first acquired, which relates to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1956) with its claim that the structure of a language subtly influences the cognitive processes of the speakers of that language. According to structural-relativistic theory, the structure of a human being's language influences the manner in which he or she understands reality, and conversely, personality development affects language

behavior (Whorf, 1956, pp. 23-26). It means that the content of thought influences the process of thought. If this is so, what effect can we expect this to have on Japanese students learning English?

This kindled my interest in the study of learners' psychological processes in second language acquisition.

The influence of Language on Personality

Guiora (1972), who initiated a systematic study of the inter-relationship between personality parameters and language behavior, studied constructs such as empathy, intuition, etc. and developed the following concepts: "language ego", "language ego boundaries" and "permeable language ego boundaries" in language acquisition.

Cultural understanding and appreciation, which are important contributing elements for effective learning, involve the acquisition of a new cultural self, a new way of expressing oneself. To fit into the target culture means, to a certain extent, to give up one's identity and culturally acquired values, and to take on a foreign identity. Taking on a new identity requires "permeable ego boundaries." Normally, Japanese students find this extremely difficult. A particular psychological barrier which hinders most Japanese learners of English from responding correctly to negative and tag questions could be attributed to having very little "permeability."

In order to overcome this language barrier, one must develop a favorable attitude toward learning English as a means of communication. If language use is said to be the manifestation of a person's psychological state of mind, the underlying constraints of the system of his or her society could be predicted from his or her speech behavior. Since language functions as a tool for socialization, in a community such as Japan's, monolingual and homogeneous with each person using a uniform linguistic code, language ego boundaries are likely to be impermeable — especially in the case of oral performance.

English Education in Japan

From the turn of the century, when the study of English literature became more and more fashionable, until quite recently, all the literary works of Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Shelley, Keats and countless others were studied in silence. Normally, neither scholars nor students read the dialogues from Hamlet or stanzas from Italian sonnets aloud. One might wonder how they appreciated the lofty rhyme and magnificent rhythm of Milton or sensitive and flowery iambic and trochaic meters of Keats and Shelley without hearing the scanning. Among men of letters, it was considered vulgar to produce sounds in order to appreciate literary works, and therefore, they were carefully translated sentence by sentence into Japanese. Even now, novels and poetry are still translated into Japanese before they can be appreciated.

Not until after the war, was the spoken pattern of English emphasized. With all the modern facilities and devices such as language laboratories and audio-visual teaching materials, one assumes that the student's ability to communicate must by now be greatly improved. To a certain extent, this is true.

However, preparation for the university entrance examination prevents high school English teachers from allowing their precious class time to be spent on listening and speaking practice. In the majority of English classrooms, stress is laid on the acquisition of grammatical knowledge and translation skills, and students faithfully devote themselves to translating English into Japanese and vice versa.

The same thing applies to university compulsory English courses for freshmen and sophomores. Generally, it is considered to be a reinforcement of their past studies as well as preparation for the coming junior and senior years, when a great deal of reading comprehension is needed in an effort to accumulate the latest information from texts and also reference books which are often written in English. Thus, apart from those who major in English literature or language, the majority of university students do not have much of

an opportunity to be exposed to the real spoken language pattern of English. So one might ask, what can a person do if he or she needs to acquire a working knowledge of English? Usually, those who are interested in or are in need of learning English for the purpose of real communication go to a private language institute where there are native-speaker instructors, most of whom hold an M. A. either in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) or in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). Such teachers enthusiastically adopt the Aural-Oral Approach, the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method, or even experiment with recent concepts such as Community Language Learning (CLL), the Silent Way and Suggestopedia, and take full advantage of the latest hard and soft ware, e. g., CAI (Computer Assisted Instruction) or CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), which can facilitate the student's learning ability.

The Task of the English Teacher

For several years now, since the Ministry of Education introduced and enforced its guideline for the three-hour-per-week English teaching system throughout the period of secondary education, the amount of time spent on practicing spoken English has noticeably diminished, as most of the time has to be spent preparing students to enter successfully the universities of their choice. Consequently, when students go to the university, the majority of them are equipped with a fine set of grammar rules which, however, they can hardly apply for productive purposes. As for pronunciation, many cannot distinguish the sound of 'she' from 'sea', 'rice' from 'lice', 'thick' from 'sick', 'five' from 'hive', 'hat' from 'hot', 'fur' from 'far' and 'vowel' from 'bowel', even though they know a tremendous number of words the meaning of which they have merely memorized mechanically and which they, therefore, cannot use actively in their speech.

What can the English teacher do, when he or she is faced with this formidable situation? Every year in April, most English teachers

normally start teaching their freshman classes by utilizing annotated reading-translation textbooks suitable for their students, assigning one page per student in order to have them demonstrate their reading and translation skills. Still other teachers, few in number, but more enthusiastic and innovative, try to teach their students listening and speaking skills by adopting the latest methods.

The Learner's Psychology

It is important for the language teacher to understand thoroughly the learner's psychology when he or she is attempting to produce sounds which are totally strange and quite dissimilar to his or her native tongue. It is, as Guiora (1972) puts it, "...a challenge to the integrity of basic identification. To engage in learning a second language is to step into a new world." It is almost an act of leaving one's national identity behind and trying to merge into another culture in which the target language acts as the code.

This attitude plays a crucial role in second language learning and proficiency in oral production. One cannot fail to notice the differences each student manifests in the process of acquiring the target language. In spite of having the same learning background and environment, the same instruction and the same amount of time spent in acquiring skills, some develop extremely high proficiency while others show very little progress.

For the past few years, my central concern has been to look into the possible causes of this difference. It is possible to attribute it to individual aptitude, i. e., an inherent, a priori capacity. However, supposing the learning of a second language is fundamentally the same process as that of the first, there should not be any difference in individual aptitude. For, every one of us learns our first language regardless of aptitude.

As was discussed earlier, there seem to be two distinctive socio-psychological factors behind these individual differences in skill-getting and especially skill-using in a foreign language (Rivers,

1964). One is an individual's "favorable attitude" toward language learning, the other is "motivation." It is important to take these psychological as well as sociological factors into consideration when teaching a foreign language.

At the beginning of the century, when English was taught solely for the purpose of acquiring knowledge or information rather than as a means of communication, Direct Method was introduced by Harold E. Palmer and his associates, flourishing, however, only for a short period of time. One of the reasons for its failure was that, as a result of peer pressure, students were extremely reluctant to respond to questions in the presence of their peers for fear of making mistakes. Another factor was their attempt to avoid uttering sounds which were strange to them, which can clearly be attributed to their having "impermeable language ego boundaries." The latter proves that one of the most difficult challenges for students is merely to attempt to produce the sound of the target language.

Conclusion

The true sense of acquisition of a foreign language does not necessarily mean the acquisition of grammatical competence of the target language alone. Rather, it necessarily involves the acquisition of the culture and an understanding of the people who speak the language, in addition to proficiency in communicating and interacting in the language.

All too often, the student who struggles to learn a foreign language ignores the importance of this aspect, and so does the teacher. In his or her enthusiasm to teach the mechanisms of the language, such as phonology, syntax and lexicon, the teacher more often than not leaves out the fundamental, yet crucial, explanation of the cultural environment in which the target language is used.

Grammatical perfection per se does not ensure perfection of performance in conveying the subtle sense and feelings of the speaker, for actual communication depends so much upon cultural and social,

as well as personal, aspects. Without having a firm knowledge of the people who speak the language, it is almost impossible really and truly to comprehend what the speaker is saying or what cultural implications the expression possesses. Teacher and student alike should, therefore, try to look into the cultural background of the language and especially the social structure in which the language has developed. Totally or partially inadequate knowledge of the target culture often leads to misinterpretation, which results in misunderstanding and sometimes entails serious consequences. The language teacher must also be aware of the sociological dimension of the target language, and be able to apply this perception in the actual classroom situation.

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