An Investigation of Changes in Identity in Japanese Native Speakers as they Acquire English Language Proficiency

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Abstract

Japan has a highly effective national education system, but English proficiency is one of its weakest points. The cultural harmony of the Japanese people poses a natural barrier to the integration of outside languacultures. This study is an investigation into identity changes inherent to switching from Japanese to English. The findings herein will illuminate the source of Japan's problem with learning English and better equip Japanese authorities to hire teachers, inform curriculum, and utilize resources. Data for this study will be collected by interviewing Japanese people who have gained a high level of English proficiency. Data will be analyzed through epoching, bracketing, and imaginative variation and conclusions will be discussed in the form of a narrative. I expect to find that the identity challenge posed to Japanese students of English will be great and require a lot more attention than it is currently being given by the Japanese authorities.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education expressed in 2002 that the Japanese Ministry of despite years of efforts including a revamp of the English language curriculum, the introduction of the JET program, which places native English speaking assistant language teachers in most junior high schools in Japan, and extensive training of Japanese teachers in English, English remains one of the weakest points in the Japanese education system. Some studies point to a lack of understanding of the relationship between language and cultural identity in the Japanese language curriculum as a reason for this failure while other studies suggest that the importance of the cultural aspect of language learning is well-known yet ignored.

The concept of *languaculture*, first described by Michael Agar in his 1996 book, *Language Shock, Understanding the Culture of Conversation*, is the idea that language includes not only elements such as grammar and vocabulary but also past knowledge, local and cultural information, and also habits and behaviors. This terminology serves as a useful tool for understanding the importance of the relationship between culture, language, and identity.

Teachers of English as a second language are also teachers of the cultural environment in which English has developed and continues to change. The ESL classroom manifests itself in different ways throughout the world and each manifestation reflects the native culture where English is taught. In Western European countries where local culture differs relatively little from that of the native English speaking world, or in the United States where learners of English as a second language are surrounded by American culture, the task of teaching a new culture is not so great. However, ESL classrooms in Japan, where cultural values differ greatly from those of the native English speaking world, are faced with cultural hurdles that pose an imposing challenge to Japanese learners of English.

Thanks to the JET program and a number of private entities which provide teaching assistants, Japanese teachers of English are often accompanied by native English speakers in the classroom. These teachers and their assistant approach ESL education from two very different cultural contexts. Japanese teachers of English teach from an East Asian cultural context where collectivism and harmony are highly valued and individual self-expression, creativity, and critical thinking are generally

discouraged. On the other hand native speaker assistants teach from a Western cultural context, where standing out, taking the lead and expressing oneself are highly valued. These conflicting value paradigms can lead to friction in the classroom, anxiety for the students throughout their learning experiences, and a general misunderstanding of the cultural context in which English is actually used.

Even when languacultural differences between English and Japanese are well understood by Japanese English teachers, there exists in the minds of many Japanese an artificial juxtaposition of Japanese and English which has become more pronounced in the school system in recent years and only serves to increase the perceived challenge of learning English in the minds of Japanese students. This 'we versus them' attitude stems from thousands of years of cultural harmony and a pervasive resistance to outside influences. Though Japan has remained culturally unique in many ways thanks to this mindset, it has also kept many young Japanese from learning how to effectively communicate in English.
Despite the Ministry of Education's disheartening assessment of the English language curriculum in Japan and the political and traditional hurdles that keep Japan linguistically isolated, there are still some students who achieve a high level of English proficiency. It has been suggested that factors responsible for these success stories may be personality type, topical specialization, motivation, cultural exposure, and willingness to redefine one's identity. The effect that these and other factors such as cultural distance have on one's ability to learn a second language have in fact been greatly explored.

Self-expression is a large part of one's identity in Western culture. As an American, I was taught in school and at home to express myself and to contribute to the conversation, use my imagination, and think outside the box. This attaching of importance to individual opinions and ideas, which by no means is limited to the culture of my own family, has been shaped by and in turn has shaped the English language. The permeating nature of this positive attitude towards self-expression can be seen clearly in beginner's level English lessons through the fundamental self-introduction. Students begin learning English by introducing themselves and telling other people about their likes and dislikes. In the western cultural context sentences such as, 'I like bananas', or 'What sport do you like?' are seen as natural topics to begin an introductory English class with. The structure of English dictates that every sentence have a subject. If the subject of a sentence is the speaker, than it is normal to repeat the personal pronoun, 'I' as often as is necessary during conversation. However, in the Japanese language, where cultural identity is not strongly defined by self-expression, these reiterations of the personal pronoun may be thought of as being pretentious, and topics that dive into one's own preferences or pry into the preferences of the listener, can be seen as conceited or nosey. Native Japanese equivalents of the aforementioned English sentences would not be
considered standard for a beginner's level Japanese course. Early level Japanese texts tend to focus on naming things in nature, talking about the weather and the seasons, and leave out the questioning found so often in English language text books. This fundamental difference in languacultures forms the base of an imposing barrier for native Japanese speakers learning English.

A lack of understanding of the implications inherent to pursuing bilingualism in a monocultural world poses an impediment to Japanese students as they learn. Switching from a conservative and reserved languaculture to an outgoing and expressive one is no small task. Considering the shortcomings of Japan's national education system in teaching the cultural implications of speaking English, it can be assumed that Japanese students who have attained a high degree of proficiency in English must have accommodated for cultural differences on their own. Students who have become proficient in English have faced and overcome more than just the difficulties of memorizing grammar and vocabulary, but have also adopted new identities in order to speak in an unhindered

and confident manner. This study is an investigation into how Japanese native speakers' identities change as they acquire English language proficiency.

II. SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND IDENTITY

L.S. Kim cites Wong-Fillmore (1983) in stating that learning a second language can be a complex social practice that engages the social identities of the language learners in ways that have received inadequate attention to date in second language acquisition theory (Kim, 2003). In response to this perceived state of negligence in the SLA academic community, studies questioning the implications of learning a new languaculture have proliferated. Miyahara sums up this research stating that it has been approached from 'two broad methodological orientations: one that examines learners identity construction through their interaction with others, and one that pursues it through oral or written auto/biographical accounts of learners' experiences in learning a foreign language' (Miyahara, 2010).

Moxon takes the former research approach in an article where the characterizes Asian (Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese and more recently Chinese) foreign language learners as being 'controlled by their cultural constraints' (Moxon, 2009) more so than language learners from other cultures. He goes on to say that from an outsiders perspective, the Japanese seem to have 'nothing to say' in the classroom. Hagerman (2009) provides a richly detailed history of the cultural environment that shapes the national identity of Japanese from the Meiji Period to the present day. He concludes that English education has been adapted by Japan as a means to further economic development, but it has also been held back out of fear of the damage it could do to the national identity of Japan. He cites an observation made by Reesor that English is taught with a 'conscious effort by policy makers to ensure access to foreign ideas without sacrificing Japanese identity (Reesor, as cited in Hagerman).

Kobayashi's awareness-raising narrative research on Japanese ESL teachers in Canada concludes by posing the question: 'how do we motivate students, with limited English proficiency and motivation to use English, to negotiate their identity…?' (Kobayashi, 2006). In Wong's extroversion/introversion and language learning study (Wong, 2011), he observes that his students' personalities affect how well they learn English. His study focuses on one personality trait, but he concludes that more research on personality and language learner is necessary.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Lantolf and Thorne, sociocultural theory is attributed to L.S. Vygotsky and his colleagues and it argues that 'human mental functioning is fundamentally a mediated process that is organized by cultural artifacts, activities, and concepts (Ratner, 2002, cited in Lantolf & Thorne, 2006)'. It argues that cultural artifacts act as a mediator between human cognitive thought and the environment in which humans live. According to sociocultural theory, all second language learning will be fundamentally biased by the cultural artifacts established by the learner's native language. Though this bias will persist, second language acquisition can be achieved through the process of vicarious participation – when 'learners observe the linguistic behavior of others and attempt to imitate it through private speech of dialogue with self', as described by Ohta (Ohta, as cited in Lantolf & Thorne).

In terms of the linguistic relationship between language and culture, Wardhaugh theorizes that cultural values determine language usage (Wardhaugh, 2002). Hall's theory that language is a 'shared cultural space' and that people who share a language share the same cultural code (Hall, 1997), support Wardhaugh's idea. Byram, et al., (2002), writing on behalf of the Council of Europe, identify the need to relativize one's own values and beliefs when learning a second language, and propose that successful bilinguals must be able to

'interpret meaning through another culture'.

Furthermore, Fadi and Nodoushan cite Eysenck (1954) in identifying personality theories that come into play in second language acquisition. Eysenck proposes that situationism is the theory that behavior is largely decided by environment. Through this paradigm our personalities are largely influenced by the culture and society in which we develop and grow. He also introduces interactionism which states that behavior and reaction is a function of the individual and their environment, giving equal weight to culture and the person.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and theories having their roots in this concept, such as Wardhaugh's and Hall's, inform my understanding in regards to the nature of language and culture. Ohta's vicarious participation and Eysneck's situationism and interactionism help me in understanding the process of learning a second language.

IV.   BILINGUALISM

This study investigates heavily the implications of bilingualism in Japan. Wald discusses a few types of bilingualism that may come into play. *Incipient bilingualism*, suggested by Diebold (Diebold, as cited in Wald, 1974), is where the speaker only possesses a shallow familiarity of a second language. Diebold uses the Huave Indians of Oaxaca, Mexico as an example. This tribe is considered to be monolingual, but they know many Spanish equivalents to words in their own language. Wald suggests that a large knowledge of vocabulary of a foreign language is enough for a person to understand much of what a speaker is saying. *Subordinate bilingualism*, suggested by Weinreich (Weinreich, as cited in Wald), is 'when a speaker acquires a second language by means of his first language rather than by direct exposure to normal use of the second language in a communicative context'. This type of bilingualism is characterized by the difference in native language and second language being lexical rather than semantic. Words are given an equal term in the second language and code switching is the main mode of grammar translation. Subordinate bilinguals suffer interference in production of the second language due to him/her using the norms of his/her first language.

Wald also attests that language makes accessible new dimensions of mental life and affects behavior. He suggests through the research of Ervin-Tripp that when the goal of learning a language is to be able to communicate, *natural bilingualism* is attained and that classroom language acquisition is unnatural because the goal is not to communicate but to learn the target language itself (Ervin-Tripp, as cited in Wald).

V.   HURDLES FACED BY SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Brown (2000) discourses vigorously on the strong effect one's native culture has on his/her identity, and how difficult it must be to switch from one languaculture to another. He describes culture as 'a template for personal and social existence' and concludes that 'reality' is something that each individual creates. Brown believes that attitudes develop early in childhood and 'are the result of parents' and peers' attitudes' and that 'these attitudes form a part of one's perception of self, of others, and of the culture in which one is living'.

Brown discusses an important aspect of learning a language of a culture that is socially distant from one's native culture. He cites Schumann's (Schumann, as cited in Brown) hypothesis that the greater the social distance between two cultures, the greater the difficulty the learner will have in learning the second language. He then references an article by Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, as cited in Brown) in which the cultures of 50 countries were compared and contrasted according to four categories: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. Using these categories to describe culture, English speaking cultures were shown to vary greatly from the Japanese culture.

Kim summarizes a large amount of research concerning language, culture, and

identity. She points to two studies conducted by Peirce (Peirce, as cited in Kim, 2003) in the field of second language acquisition that have added new light to the role of motivation in learning a second language and the concept of identity. Kim agrees with Peirce's opinion that the term *investment* should be used alongside *motivation*. The traditional concept of motivation alone fails to take into account the complex relationship among power, identity, and language learning. She also agrees with Peirce's conclusions that language learners are complex social beings with a multitude of fluctuating and sometimes conflicting needs, and that identity is multiple, fluid, and often contradictory.

VI. METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study examines how Japanese learner's experience changes in attitude towards their own identities as they acquire English language proficiency. Through analyzing data collected through on-site interviews and triangulating the results with current research, conclusions specifically focus on understanding challenges to learners' identities that may arise through the process of second language acquisition between two very different languacultures – Japanese and English.

Participants are three Japanese nationals who were raised in Japan, are currently able to use English at a high level and are able to participate in verbal English interviews conducted by a native English speaker at a natural speed. The participants were selected using purposive sampling at first through an acquaintance of the researcher and then through the process of snowballing where interviewees recommended subsequent participants. Since the research question does not discriminate any geographical area or age/sex group, participants were chosen based solely on their English language abilities and geographical and circumstantial accessibility.

The main source of data in this study is audio-recorded onsite interviews. I am currently in the process of conducting three interviews lasting roughly 60 minutes per interview with each participant and recording audio using a digital recording device. The interviews will use the following five questions as a starting point:

1. What was your impression of the English language when you began to feel competent in conversation?
2. In what ways did you feel that your core beliefs were challenged when learning English?
3. How do your thoughts and actions differ when operating in English versus operating in Japanese?
4. What makes you successful as a bilingual speaker?
5. How would you instruct a Japanese friend who wants to learn English as well as you have?

I will transcribe recorded data into a word document for the purpose of thoughtful and informed analysis.

In the interest of ethics, this study does not include the participation of individuals considered minors in Japan (under the age of 20). All participants will be given a pseudonym to protect their identities and any information collected during interviews that may identify subjects will be censored or changed to ensure anonymity. All printed and recorded data will be safeguarded for a period no shorter than 5 years in accordance with the advice of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. All participants will be asked to sign a research waiver form in accordance with the research ethics policy of Asia Pacific International University.

The voices of the participants will be reported verbatim and their own ideas concerning the subject matter will form the content of my analysis. I will use phenomenological analysis techniques such as epoching, bracketing, and imaginative variation to draw conclusions from experiences shared by participants. I will also draw from my own experiences as a second language learner of Japanese and as

an individual who lives in a dual languaculture. I will chiefly approach data analysis from the perspective of heuristic inquiry by comparing and contrasting my own life experiences with those of the participants in order to produce a narrative description that may shed light on the phenomenon in question. I will triangulate results by comparing my narrative analysis of categories and codes to related literature. As the study progresses, the bricolage of research will grow organically to reflect emergent themes.

VII. EXPECTED RESULTS

As this research is currently underway, I have no results to report as of yet. I suspect from my own experiences of learning Japanese that my interviewees will have had to overcome some daunting challenges to identity in learning English and that learning English may not be a task that the average Japanese secondary school student is ready to undertake. Japanese culture, though highly regarded for its beauty, harmony, and attention to detail, may in fact pose an added difficulty in learning foreign languages, particularly English, due to the gaping cultural distance between the two languacultures.

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