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Anxiety or Admiration?: Japanese EFL Learners' Perceptions of Native Speaker Teachers' Classes

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the psychological state of Japanese EFL learners in classes with a native speaker teacher of English (NSTE) by focusing on the anxiety of EFL learners and their expectations towards NSTEs. In previous research on motivation of Japanese learners in team teaching (TT), Miyazato (2002) described paradoxical student attitudes of both admiration and anxiety toward NSTE's. The socio-political aspects of English and NSTEs and the low tolerance of students

to linguistic uncertainty in English-only classes are assumed to be deeply related to this tendency.

In order to examine this assumption, observations were conducted of four NSTEs' classes in a small Japanese university and 13 Japanese EFL learners from those classes were interviewed. The research results indicate that the psychological states of Japanese EFL learners have been influenced by the socio-political power of English and NSTEs as well as socio-cultural factors of the learners' 'face' and 'amae'.

本研究は、EFL学習における学習者の不安、及び、ネイティブスピーカーの英語教師（NSTE）への期待に焦点を当て、NSTEの授業での日本人学習者の心理状態を探究することを目的とする。ティームティーチングにおける日本人学習者の動機付け要因に関する宮里（2002）の先行研究では、学生のNSTEへの憧れと不安という相対する態度が報告された。この傾向には、英語及びNSTEに対する社会的政治的側面と英語のみの授業における学習者の言語的不確実性への耐性の低さが深く関わっているものと推測される。

この仮定を精査するため、ある日本の小規模大学において、4人のNSTEの授業観察、及び上記のクラスに属する13人の日本人学生への個別インタビューを実施した。その結果、英語とNSTEが持つ社会的政治的権力、及び「面子」や「甘え」という学習者の社会的文化的要因が、日本人学習者の心理状態に影響を及ぼしていることが判明した。

Introduction

Japanese EFL learners' anxiety

Anxiety in language learning has been regarded as a crucial affective factor for attitude and motivation of L2 learners (Clement, Dörnyei and Noels, 1994). In addition to linguistic anxiety toward NSTE classes conducted only in English (Ellis, 1993) and their mental block caused by word-by-word grammar translation (Yamashiro and McLaughlin, 2000), psychological distance toward NSTEs is presumed to be another component of anxiety of Japanese EFL learners. Medgyes (1992, p. 340) states that Non-NSTEs have advantages in anticipating language difficulties by being empathetic to the learners' problems and sharing the learners' mother tongue. Furthermore, Yamashiro and McLaughlin (2000, p. 13) draw attention to the Japanese notion of 'face' and extraordinary pressure to conform to group norms in Japanese EFL learning settings.

Japanese students' perceptions of native (NS) and non-native (NNS) English teachers

Despite the anxiety of learners toward NSTEs and their classes discussed above, a contradictory perception of NSTEs as 'charismatic' is reported by Japanese EFL learners (Miyazato, 2002). Canagarajah (1999) explains that English spoken by NSs is still admired as "correct" and often appreciated more by learners, administrators, or even English teachers in Japan regardless of their educational background or professional expertise.

This phenomenon of *native speaker fallacy* (Phillipson, 1992) seems to be deeply related to Japanese social and political

perceptions toward English and English speaking people. Kubota (1998, p. 298) reports that the NNS of English is viewed as uncivilized and inferior to the Anglo speaker of English. Under these circumstances of socio-political inequalities between NSs and NNSs, TT classes in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program have become more AET (Assistant English Teacher)-centered recently, and Japanese teachers of English have tended to take a more passive role as interpreters.

Method

Participants

Four NSTEs in a small university were asked to participate in this study. The university is located in a minor city, in what can be described as a relatively rural district, approximately 120 km north of central Tokyo. Two NSTEs teach a required English conversation course to freshmen in the Department of Business and Communication (BC) and the other two teach a required public speaking course for junior students in the Department of Business. The class size of each course is about 20. The background information of the four teachers is summarized in Table 1.1.

The four NSTEs were asked to choose a few students from their class to participate in the interviews on a voluntary basis. The participants were 13 students in four different classes from two departments: 5 students from two different levels (the second top and the second lowest) in the BC department; 8 students in two mixed-leveled classes in the Department of Business.

The students were all born and raised in Japan. Their previous experience with NSTEs in secondary school was mostly through TT under the JET Program and the frequency of

Table 1.1. Teachers' background information

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
M/F	F	M	M	M
Age	mid-40s	mid-30s	early-50s	mid-50s
Ethnicity	1/2 Japa. 1/2 Ame.	1/2 Japa. 1/2 Ger.	Japa.-Ame.(3rd)	Japa.-Ame.(3rd)
Origin	Japan	Japan	Hawaii	Hawaii
Native language	English	English	English	English
Japanese language	bilingual	bilingual	limited	limited
Teaching experience	5 years	5 years	11 years	13 years
Length of living in Japan	whole life	whole life	15 years	20 years
TESOL background	M.A.	none	M.A.	none
Department	B.C.	B.C.	Business	Business

Abbreviations: M=male, F= female, 1/2=half, Japa.=Japanese, Ame. =American, Ger.=German, 3rd=third generation

contact with AETs was limited because of “one-shot” visits, or occasional visits of AETs to their schools.

At present, the five freshman students in the BC department, which places a strong emphasis on English in its curriculum, have one EFL class taught by a JTE mainly for grammar studies and three classes by three different NSTEs weekly for developing students' communicative abilities. Participation in a three-month-study abroad program is required of all students in their sophomore year in the BC department. The eight students in the department of Business must complete a curriculum that has less of an emphasis on English. Freshman have two EFL

classes per week: 1.5 classes taught by a JTE only and 0.5 class which is team-taught, with both a JTE and an NSTE present. In their second year they take one class per week taught by a JTE and only in their third year do they have one class per week by an NSTE.

There is no standardized test given across the two departments, so English proficiency levels are rough estimates based on grades given in the course and overall impressions of the teachers. Further information concerning NSTE and overseas experiences are summarized in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2. Participants' background information

	M/F	Age	Dep.	Level	NSTE / Overseas Experience etc.
S1	F	19	BC	H	1-week-sightseeing in Singapore
S2	M	18	BC	H	<i>Juku</i> school by a JTE from elementary school
S3	F	18	BC	I-L	None
S4	M	19	BC	I-L	2-week-family visit in South Africa and USA
S5	M	18	BC	I-L	None
S6	M	21	Bu.	L	None
S7	F	21	Bu.	H	2-week-summer stay in England
S8	M	20	Bu.	L-I	None
S9	M	21	Bu.	L-I	1-month conversation school by an NSTE in elementary school
S10	M	22	Bu.	L	None
S11	M	21	Bu.	L	None
S12	F	21	Bu.	H	10-day sightseeing in Hawaii
S13	F	21	Bu.	I-H	Conversation school by an NSTE at present, English club by an AET in junior high school

Abbreviations: S = Student; Dep. = Department; Bu. = Business; H = High; I = Intermediate; L = Low

Procedure

Classroom observation was first conducted in November 2001. The author subsequently interviewed the 13 Japanese EFL students individually. Interview times ranged from 20 minutes

to 55 minutes, with an average length of about 35 minutes. The interviews were open-ended and participants could talk freely about classes taught by NSTEs they had taken in the past as well as those of the NSTEs in this study. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed.

Interview Results / Discussion

Anxiety in NSTEs' classes

Firstly, linguistic anxiety in the initial stages of instruction in an NSTE class was mentioned by most students. They specifically mentioned that speed of speech and the use of unfamiliar vocabulary by NSTEs as major sources of their anxiety. Not only speech but also non-verbal features seem to be challenging for Japanese students. Student 7 reveals her sensitivity toward NSTEs' facial expressions as follows.

If my NSTEs don't understand my English and show it on their face, I don't feel like speaking English any more to them. I know they speak perfect English since they are NSs of English, so we need tremendous courage in speaking English to them.

Paradoxically, however, Students 8, 9 and 10 expressed complex concerns about their linguistic anxiety in NSTEs' classes. They stated that NSTEs' knowledge of the Japanese language helped them to feel less anxious, but too much knowledge of it induces an over-dependence which ultimately de-motivates students. Student 9 explained,

I want NSTEs to understand me with their knowledge of Japanese only when I cannot make myself understood in English, but I want to test my own English abilities without any help when I can. That's why I don't want them to understand Japanese too well.

Furthermore, psychological distance toward the English language and NSTEs themselves is reported. Student 6 said,

I feel overwhelmed by them, because I'm not used to foreigners. I feel at ease with my NSTE, because he is a Japanese-American. Asian looking makes me feel all right. Besides, I have some resistance toward the English language itself. English is a real 'foreign' language which I thought we never use in my own life.

Socio-political power of English and NSTEs: 'Genuine-ness' and 'foreign-ness'

Although quite a few students confessed initial fear or anxiety toward NSTE classes caused mainly by linguistic anxiety, their major evaluation of classes taught by NSTEs was extremely high. It seems that the 'fear' toward NSTEs was converted into "joy." Student 4 explained as follows:

I get nervous when I speak to NSTEs because of the fear that either can I understand them or make myself understood by them linguistically and culturally. That's why my pleasure becomes enormous when I find out that I can successfully communicate with them.

Then, what exactly is this 'joy'? Student 3 illustrates this joy of contact with NSTEs.

I am a little anxious but thrilled to see 'foreigners,' because I know I can learn 'proper' English from them. I am dreaming of the scene of myself talking with foreigners in English. It is just so good to imagine myself managing in English with no problem with NSTEs..... I guess their appearance

makes a difference. Even if JTEs speak near-native English, they won't motivate us as much as NSTEs do because JTEs' appearance is the same as us. The different appearance of NSTEs makes us realize that we are using English.

Students 8 and 13 reported that they wanted to master what they called the "beautiful" pronunciation of the NSTEs from them rather than from JTEs who did not acquire English as a NS. Student 3 mentioned her preference for "genuine" English speakers as follows:

I feel that I can learn better English and pronunciation from NSTEs. That's why I pay more attention to NSTEs and concentrate better in their classes. JTEs speak Japanese mostly, so we don't have to listen attentively since we can hear Japanese naturally without any concentration and effort.

Students also see English as an elite or politically powerful language, not simply as a means of international communication. Student 5 commented as follows:

It's just so cool to be able to speak English, an international language. I also admire English pronunciation and body language. I would feel like an high-class individual if I could manage English...Having NSTEs' classes is like an instant studying abroad without leaving Japan. Being with foreigners is so much fun for me because it rarely happens in my daily life.

In short, the ideal image of NSTEs for Japanese EFL learners is to own a 'foreign' appearance and 'genuine' English, which associates them with socio-political superiority, and consequently, gives the learners a motivational impetus to learn English.

Teaching styles of NSTEs

Student 8 perceived instruction by JTEs as memorization or passive learning, but that of NSTEs as utilization of English or activating English knowledge. Student 13 identified emphasis on content and not on grammar by NSTEs. This practical English instruction seems to give students confidence as well. Student 3 said,

Since we learn the beginning-leveled English again in English conversation classes, I was able to recognize that I have understood English to some extent. I'm so glad that my English isn't too bad.

Additionally, many students pointed out the charm of group activities in NSTE classes. Student 13 described the merits of group activities as sharing embarrassment and responsibility with other group members, which reduces the stress and burden of losing face in class. She added that a cooperative class atmosphere was created naturally by thinking together so that classmates became closer, which made her work harder for other group members.

Furthermore, several students mentioned that being approachable was an important characteristic of NSTEs. Several students described NSTEs' sincere eye contact with every student. Student 13 also mentioned that making mistakes was not a failure because her teacher corrected her mistakes without hint of accusation.

In summary, it appears that teaching styles employed by NSTEs featuring easier contents, group activities, and a non-authoritarian attitude allow students to recognize their linguistic assets, and reduced anxiety, which, in turn, helped learners to strengthen confidence in themselves.

Socio-cultural notions of 'face' and *amae*

Student 12 mentioned the discomfort of speaking like a native speaker in front of peers. She said that she has a good excuse to speak with a native-like accent in NSTE classes because English with a Japanese accent cannot be understood by NSTEs, which is known by peers as well. Additionally, many students communicated the merit of being in a smaller-sized class. Student 3 commented as follows:

In a bigger class, maybe most of students don't know my English level and I don't want them to think I'm a fool. This thought makes me think that I can never make mistakes in public.

Compared to NSTE only English classes, *amae* toward JTEs was referred to by many students. Student 2 explained,

Maybe we cannot be serious unless we feel real necessity or pressure...If we know that teachers understand Japanese, we just depend on it and that's it. We feel "Take it easy. Why not speak Japanese?" *Amae* will arise in our mind this way.

Student 1 said,

I wonder why I have to speak English with JTEs. I know they would use Japanese anyway in case of emergency. I cannot find any sense of crisis here, so I cannot be serious in using English with JTEs ...It's just implausible and unrealistic to speak like a native speaker in front of Japanese peers and JTEs anyway, because it is not necessary.

Another type of *amae* was also mentioned by Student 3.

We'll just be quiet when we are asked questions by JTEs, then JTEs will say something. They know and even accept that we didn't listen or understand. In case of NSTEs, however, we have to say something, because this doesn't work with them.

Thus, the Japanese students in this study are eager to preserve 'face,' especially in the presence of other peers in a big class, and to avoid violating the Japanese cultural sense of group solidarity by paying considerable attention to others' perceptions of themselves when speaking English. At the same time, "*amae*" is perceived to be a negative and a de-motivating factor for learners. Many of them, especially the ones with higher motivation and proficiency, prefer the NSTE English only environment where a sense of crisis increases their motivation.

Concluding remarks

The results of this study indicate that the NSTEs' 'genuine' English attracts Japanese EFL learners just because they have a 'fear' of NSTEs, who do not share their linguistic and cultural background. This fear is converted into joy when they succeed in communicating with NSTEs. "Authentic" English and the elite or 'exotic' image of NSTEs are highly valued by Japanese learners, as witnessed by a student's comment that near-native JTEs are still regarded as linguistically and culturally inferior because JTEs are different cultural and social beings from NSTEs. The results reveal that the psychological states of foreign language learners are affected by the socio-political power of English and NSTEs and by socio-cultural factors such as 'face' and '*amae*.'

As for the issue of over-admiration of English, EFL teachers in Japan should clarify the purposes of learning EFL to Japanese learners and to inform them of the concept of “World Englishes” in order to establish a unique English identity in this borderless society. It would therefore be ideal for Japanese learners to encounter more non-NSTEs from non-major English speaking countries and non-Japanese peers in class. By creating and getting accustomed to linguistic and cultural diversity, over-admiration of the West and Westerners will be softened and a more balanced view of the world will be realized. In the long run, the sense of *amae* toward JTEs may be lessened by having EFL teachers of various nationalities.

However, the socio-cultural notion of ‘face’ is more difficult to resolve and requires some additional administrative preparation. It is important to put students of similar proficiency levels together and to reduce the class size to 20 or less, which would help to develop a friendly classroom atmosphere. If students do not recognize an enormous difference in their English proficiency levels when speaking among peers, it can be assumed that the Japanese cultural sense of group solidarity will be maintained and learners will pay less attention to others’ perceptions of themselves when speaking English.

Certainly, the psychological state of foreign language learners is complex. In order to provide learners with a better learning environment, I believe it is necessary for both NSTEs and non-NSTEs to exchange information on each other’s strengths and weaknesses and to cooperate in the solving of problems together.

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