Factors Underlying Learners' Perceived Ability to Give Directions in Their L2

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This paper provides a context sensitive account of the different factors underlying 143 Japanese university students' perceived ability to give verbal directions in their L2. A Rasch analysis of a 48 item questionnaire completed by each student after they spoke revealed the impact that (a) their English oral communication course, (b) their perceived communicative competence, (c) their interlocutors in the conversation, and (d) the characteristics of the task had upon their ability to successfully give directions. The analysis also found that a majority of students attributed their success to a number of different factors. These findings thus provide language teachers with important insights on how they can structure pedagogical tasks to further develop their students' level of communicative competence.

この論文は、143名の日本人の大学生が、第二言語を用いて口頭で方向を教えることができると自身が感じている能力の背後にはさまざまな要因があることを、文脈に配慮して説明するものである。口頭で方向を教えるという活動を行った後に、学生に回答してもらった48項目からなるアンケートをラッシュ分析した結果、(a)教室で行った英語のオーラル・コミュニケーションの練習、 (b)学生が自身のコミュニケーション遂行能力と感じている力、(c)学生が会話をした相手、(d)与えられた課題の特性、という要因が、学生がうまく方向を教えることができる能力に与える影響力は、かなり多様であることがわかる。さらに、英語でうまく方向を与える能力が高まった要因であると学生自身が感じている要因の数は、学生により異なっていた。これらの知見は、外国語の教授者に対して、教室以外の場でも学生が外国語を使えるようになる手助けをするために活用しうる、重要な洞察を与えるものである。

Communicative-language teaching along with task-based language instruction places learners in contexts where they need to use their second language (L2). After experiencing these communicative situations, second language learners often reflect upon their L2 performance and formulate beliefs concerning which factors influenced their ability to successfully use their L2. This act of reflection is a central tenant of attribution theory, which claims that people's perceptions of an event is more influential on future behavior than the actual event itself (Williams & Burden, 1997). This study aims to identify which factors students believe enhanced their perceived ability to perform a real-world task, that being giving directions in English. Gaining a deeper understanding of these factors will enable language teachers to structure pedagogical tasks in their classes that will promote students' L2 use outside of the classroom.

Attribution Theory in Second Language Research

Although attribution theory has been prevalent in general educational research and sports psychology (e.g. Callaghan & Manstead, 1983), second language researchers are just beginning to consider the impact of this individual difference. Wiener's

(1985) attribution-based model of achievement motivation has been the driving force behind much of this research. This model is typically represented by a 2 x 2 matrix (shown in Figure 1) with locus of causality and stability being the two dimensions. According to this model people tend to refer to four sets of attributions to explain their perceived successes and failures: (a) ability, (b) effort, (c) task difficulty, or (d) luck. Attribution studies conducted in the field of general education have largely found that people attribute success to internal factors (i.e. ability and effort) and failure to external factors (i.e. task difficulty and luck). Some researchers (e.g. Weiner et al., 1972) have suggested that this pattern of behavior helps people protect their self-image when they experience failure by allowing them to attribute their poor performance to external factors which they cannot control. Whereas, considering success as being the result of internal factors enhances people's feeling of self-worth. Interestingly, the small amount of research investigating attributions in second language learning has not consistently found this relationship between internal/external factors and success/failure.

Figure 1. Weiner's Attribution-based Model of Achievement Motivation

	Locus of causality	
	Internal	**External**
Stable	Ability	Task Difficulty
Unstable	Effort	Luck

Williams and Burden's (1999) investigation of British junior high school students studying French found that initially the students attributed their successes to internal factors such as listening and concentrating. However, as the students progressed in their studies external factors such as help from others and the quality of language instruction became common explanations for success. A similar pattern was also found in students' perceived reasons for not doing well in French. Initially students thought that their lack of ability was behind their failures. Yet later on, they attributed their poor L2 performance to external factors such as task difficulty and distraction by others. Matikainen (2002, December) found a similar belief system amongst Japanese university students. After six years of studying English, these students attributed success and failure in high school English classes to external rather than internal factors. These two studies thus suggest a potential continuum where external factors turn out to be the prevalent reasons for success and failure as students advance in their language studies.

Another study lending support to this idea of a continuum is Hines and Barraclough's (1995) finding that novice language learners often reported low levels of language ability, an internal factor, when they could not describe a close acquaintance in their L2. However when the task was to describe an unfamiliar person, students claimed a lack of knowledge rather than their L2 ability as the reason for their poor performance. This study thus reveals how different communicative contexts can influence second language learners' attributions.

The present study continues along this path of investigation to provide a more complete account of

how a specific communicative context influences second language learners' perceptions of their L2 performance. This study thus represents an empirical shift from general L2 achievement to context sensitive L2 performance. The following research questions guide this study:

1. To what extent do second language learners believe different factors influence their perceived ability to successfully give directions in their L2?
2. To what extent do the different factors influence second language learners' perceived ability to successfully give directions in their L2?

Answers to these questions will provide language teachers with a deeper understanding of how second language learners make sense of their L2 use in a particular communicative situation. This information can, in turn, help language teachers design pedagogical tasks that will help further develop their learners' L2 communicative competence.

Method

Participants

This study involved 143 first-year Japanese university students attending a national university in Tokyo, Japan. National universities in Japan usually attract students who have a higher level of English proficiency since enrollment in these institutions is quite competitive. In general, the students' level of English comprehension exceeded their productive knowledge. This imbalance is most likely the result of the heavy use of grammar-translation methodology in Japanese junior and senior high school language classes as well as the wash back effect of university entrance examinations which predominately assess students' English comprehension skills. This group of students included 38 females and 105 males. All of the participants were non-English majors taking a required English oral communication course as part of their foreign language requirement. After being informed about the general purpose of the research project, the students agreed to participate in the study and complete a 48-item questionnaire.

Materials

The questionnaire was composed of three sections. The first section focused on biographical data. The second section asked students to assess their ability to give directions in English in terms of perceived levels of accuracy, fluency and the ability to organize their directions into an easy to understand explanation. The third section required students to assess the impact that (a) the English oral communication course, (b) their perceived communicative competence, (c) their interlocutors in the conversation, and (d) the characteristics of the task had upon their ability to successfully give directions in English.

For the purposes of this paper, only the students' responses to the third section of the questionnaire are considered. The factors featured in the questionnaire were selected in a two-step process. First, an extended list of potential factors was compiled through a series of interviews with a small group of students who completed the speaking task in a pilot study. Then the list of factors was reduced and organized into four groups using a factor analysis. Table 1 shows the factors

which were investigated in this study. Accompanying each factor is an abbreviation that will help identify their location on Figure 2. The first letter of the abbreviation refers to one of the four groups of factors, while the second letter is taken from a keyword in the item. For example, item OS refers to the impact of the oral communication class and how the class has prepared students to speak with strangers.

Table 1. Items in Section Three of the Questionnaire

Oral Communication Class	
OS	The class helped me speak with strangers
OV	The class helped me with the needed vocabulary
OO	The class gave me confidence to speak outside
OF	The class gave me the ability to speak fluently
OG	The class gave me the needed grammar
Perceived Communicative Competence	
PA	I feel very confident in my general language abilities
PV	I have the needed vocabulary
PG	I have the needed grammar
PF	I have the ability to speak fluently
Interlocutor	
IN	Not knowing what my partner was going to ask did not influence my ability to give good directions
IK	Knowing the person I am talking to is important to giving good directions
IU	I had no trouble understanding my partner
IS	I had no trouble with my partners speed
Characteristics of the Task	
TW	I knew the way to the station so it was easy to give directions
TR	The task repetition allowed me to give better directions
TS	The task sequencing allowed me to give better directions
TI	It was interesting talking to a stranger so I could give better directions
TO	There is no difference speaking English inside and outside of the class
TN	It was easy giving directions with no map
TM	It was easy giving directions with a map

The students scored the degree to which they felt the English oral communication course, their perceived communicative competence, their interlocutors and the task characteristics improved their ability to successfully give directions on a four-point Likert scale. The points of the

scale were labeled: 1. strongly disagree; 2. disagree; 3. agree, and 4. strongly agree.

The initial version of the questionnaire was written in English. Two Japanese EFL instructors then independently translated the questionnaire into Japanese. Afterwards they compared and combined their translations to ensure that the wording of the items and the scales sounded natural and appropriate. The questionnaire was then administered to a test group of university students from the target population. Their feedback resulted in a few word changes.

Procedures

During the students' last scheduled 90-minute oral communication class, each Japanese student left the classroom to speak with two Indonesian students waiting on a nearby street. The Indonesian students had an extremely high level of English proficiency and were attending the same national university on a different campus. As a result, the Japanese students never had a chance to meet them, which contributed to a more authentic communicative situation of a stranger asking for directions.

In order to approximate a spontaneous conversation, the Japanese students had no prior knowledge about the conversation topic. Once they reached the street, one of the Indonesian students approached them asking directions to the closest train station. The Indonesian students were instructed by the researcher beforehand what to ask and the importance of using only English when they spoke. After giving the directions to the train station, the Japanese students continued onto the second Indonesian student who asked the same question. The Japanese students then returned to a different classroom to complete the questionnaire. This procedure ensured that the details of the conversation remained unknown to the Japanese students who had not yet spoken with the Indonesian students and thus prevented them from preparing what to say in advance.

The Japanese students were told not to include their names on the questionnaire in order to facilitate more candid responses. Moreover, a research assistant collected the completed questionnaires so that the students' identities remained unknown to the researcher, who was also the students' instructor. The students were also assured that the information collected would not be used towards their course grades. The questionnaire was administered in Japanese (see Appendix A) and took approximately ten to fifteen minutes to complete.

Analysis

The students' responses to the questionnaire were analyzed using the Rasch Rating Scale model (Andrich, 1978) implemented by WINSTEPS (Linacre, 2004). This model provides parameter estimates of person ability and item difficulty on a truly interval scale measured in logits. Considering that this unit of measurement is not widely familiar, it was transformed into a user-friendly 1 to 100 scale. In the context of this investigation, person ability equates to the number of factors that students believe enhanced their ability to give directions in English. Thus, a student with a high person ability estimate (closer to 100) believes that more factors improved his or her ability to give directions in English than a student who has a low person

ability estimate (closer to 0). Item difficulty, on the other hand, involves the difficulty in which students had endorsing the different factors. If a factor has a high difficulty estimate (closer to 100), students had a hard time agreeing that it improved their ability to give directions in English. The opposite is true of a factor that has a low difficulty estimate.

The person ability and item difficult estimates produced by a Rasch analysis are usually graphically represented as a person-item map (see Figure 2). A person-item map is basically two standard distribution curves turned vertically and then brought together. The left side of the person-item map is the standard distribution curve for person ability. In other words, it is the ranking of the 143 Japanese students based upon the number of factors they believed positively influenced their ability to give directions in English. Students who attributed their L2 performance to all of the 20 different factors will have high person ability estimates and thus will be located on the upper left-hand side of the person-item map. The opposite is true of students who believed that only a few of the factors influence their ability to give directions in English. When interpreting the students' locations on the person-item map, it should be remembered that each number sign (#) represents two students.

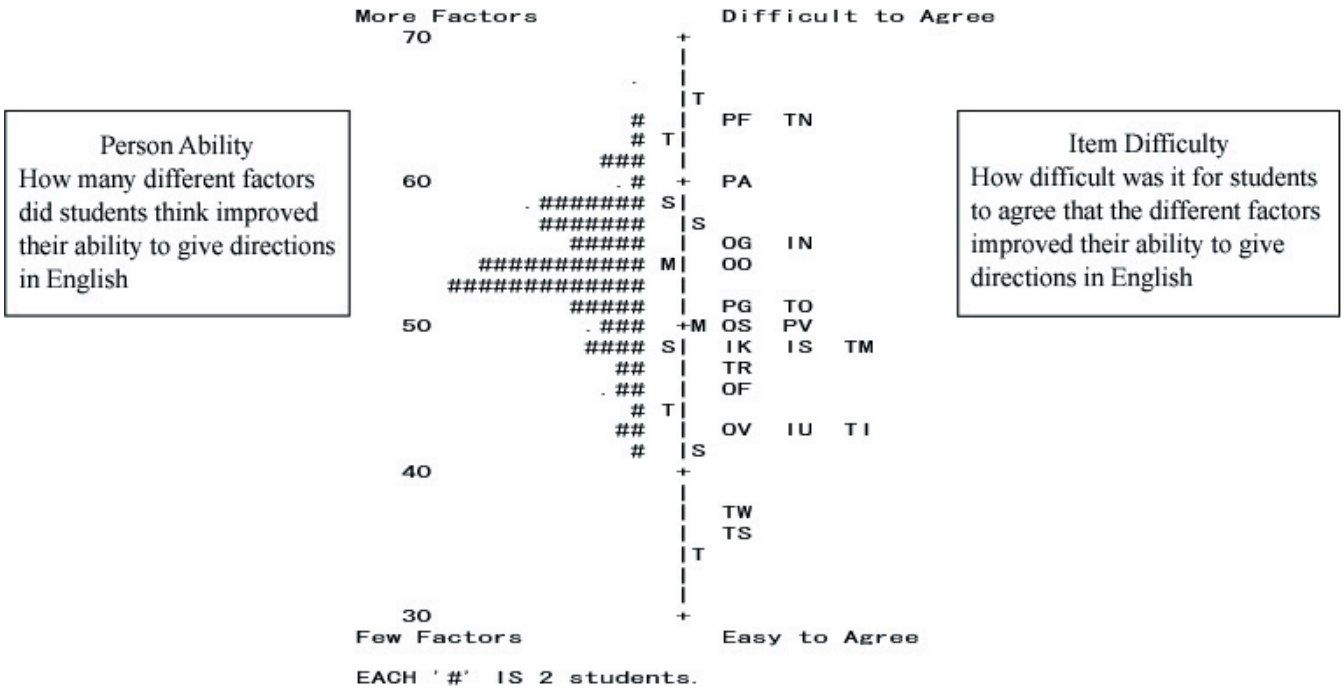
The right side of the person-item map is the standard distribution curve for item difficulty. This side of the person-item map shows the level of difficulty students had endorsing the 20 different underlying factors. If students had a tough time attributing their successful L2 performance to a particular factor, then that factor will have a high item difficulty estimate and thus it will be located on the upper right-hand side of the person-item map. In contrast, when students have little difficulty agreeing that a particular factor enhances their ability to give directions, the factor will have a low difficulty estimate and thus it will be located on the lower right-hand side of the person-item map. The abbreviations of the different factors (listed in Table 1) should help determine the locations of the 20 different underlying factors on the right side of the person-item map.

Results

Person Ability

The left side of Figure 2 shows that the students thought that a number of different factors improved their ability to give directions in English. The average person ability of 55 (signified by the M on the left side of the person-item map) indicates that the average student thought 15 different factors influenced their ability. This collection of factors starts with task sequencing (TS) and continues up to the oral communicative class giving students the confidence to speak English outside (OO). At the extreme ends, four students believed that only 2 factors, knowing the way to the train station (TW) and the task sequencing (TS) improved their ability; whereas, four students believed that all 20 factors positively influenced their ability to give directions in English. The person reliability index for the students' rankings was .68 (this reliability coefficient is interpreted similar to Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient for the internal consistency of response items). Thus, we must be cautious when interpreting how many factors students believe influenced their ability to successfully give directions in English.

Figure 2. Person-item Map for the Different Factors Underlying Students' Ability to Give Directions in English



Item Difficulty

The right side of Figure 2 shows that the four groups of factors encompass a large range of difficulty. This range results in an item reliability index of .98. Thus, we can be confident that the questionnaire contains some factors that students easily endorsed and other factors that students had difficult endorsing. To simplify the reporting of these results, we will examine the four groups of underlying factors separately.

The Impact of the Task Characteristics

In terms of the task characteristics, students thought that knowing the way to the station (TW) and the task sequencing (TS) were important factors for giving successful directions

in English. Ten points higher on the item difficulty scale is the repetitive nature of the task (TR). Thus, having the opportunity to immediately repeat the conversation did not necessarily lead all students to the feeling of an improved L2 performance. The same was true of having the map in hand when giving the directions (TM). However, speaking without the map (TN) was the most difficult factor for students to endorse. Only four students felt that the absence of a map did not negatively influence their ability to give directions in English. The location of the speaking situation was also another factor that varied amongst students. Learners whose person ability score was below 52 felt that the difference between speaking English inside and outside of the classroom (TO) negatively influenced their ability to give directions.

The Impact of the Interlocutor

The interlocutor effect covered a slightly smaller range of difficulty and thus these factors are located closer together on the right side of Figure 2. Students thought that understanding their conversational partner (IU) was important. The opportunity to speak with a stranger (TI) was another factor students felt enhanced their L2 performance. In contrast, dealing with the speed of their partner's speech (IS) and knowing the person (IK) were not seen as important factors. The most difficult factor for students to endorse was the uncertainty surrounding what their interlocutor was going to ask (IN) before entering the conversation.

The Impact of the Oral Communication Course

Items relating to the oral communication course also formed a relatively compact range of item difficulty. Students thought that their oral communication class helped them with the necessary vocabulary (OV) and the level of fluency (OF) needed to give directions in English. The classroom's effect on building students' confidence to speak English to a stranger (OS) was a little more difficult to endorse. Students had the most difficulty agreeing with the statements that their communication course helped them build the confidence to speak English outside of the classroom (OO) and knowledge of the grammatical structures needed to give directions in English (OG).

The Impact of Perceived Communicative Competence

In general, students felt uneasy about their level of communicative competence. The easiest item for students to endorse, having the needed vocabulary to give directions (PV), was at the mean difficulty for all the factors (indicated by the M on the right side of Figure 2). Slightly more difficult for students to support was the statement that they had the necessary grammatical competence (PG). Students had even a greater degree of difficulty believing that their general communicative competence (PA) was at the level where they could successfully give directions in English. Finally, students' confidence that they spoke fluently enough (PF) was the most difficult factor to endorse.

Discussion

The results of this investigation provide language teachers with a number of insights into how second language learners make sense of their L2 use. This study found that a majority of students attributed their ability to successfully give directions in English to a number of different factors. In addition, the students varied considerably on how much they felt the different factors influenced their L2 performance. The combined effect of these two findings may lead some language teachers to feel that learners' perceptions of their L2 performance in a specific communicative situation is highly individualized, thus providing little value for L2 instruction.

Yet, a closer examination of the different underlying factors reveals that many of the most salient factors for students are within the realm of L2 instruction. For example, students thought that having access to a map when giving directions for the first time (TS) greatly increased their ability to successfully give directions in English. The visual support which the map provides most likely lessens the cognitive load that students face. With the map in hand, students can bypass the step of having to create a mental map from their present location to the closest train station. Thus they can immediately focus their attention on composing and conveying their directions in English. Previous knowledge of the way to the train station (TW) was another factor which students felt enhanced their ability to give directions. Once again, talking about something familiar helps lessen the cognitive load students face. Tarone (1985) found a similar effect with a group of second language learners who performed considerably better when asked to discuss their field of study at university. The opportunity to speak about a familiar topic can also increase students' L2 willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, Babin, & Clement, 1999).

The repetitive nature of the task also enhanced some students' ability to successfully give directions. This finding provides general support to the growing body of research investigating the effects of task repetition (e.g. Bygate, 1996; Lynch & Maclean, 2000). However unlike previous research which has relied on objective measurements of accuracy, complexity and fluency, this study confirms that some students perceived an actual benefit by repeating the same speaking task twice. This difference supports the central argument of attribution theory which states that perceived L2 performance rather than actual L2 performance influences future L2 use.

The role of the interlocutor was another important factor. Students thought that it was interesting to give directions to someone they did not know (TI). Moreover, they had little trouble understanding what their interlocutor wanted to know (IU). Ideally these positive perceptions will help students seek other opportunities where they can use English outside of the classroom. In other words, pedagogical tasks simulating real-world situations can potentially be very motivating for second language learners. Yet, some students in this study perceived a difference between speaking English inside and outside of the language class (TO). As a result, this type of task may be best conceptualized as a pedagogical tool that bridges the gap between the classroom and the outside world.

Language instruction is one means of helping students make the transition from speaking inside to outside of the language classroom. Almost all of the students felt that their oral communication course had taught them the necessary vocabulary (OV) and developed the needed fluency (OF)

to successfully give directions in English. In sharp contrast, these students also reported that they lacked the ability to give directions fluently when they spoke (PF). Moreover, only half of the students believed that their oral communication course helped them develop the confidence to speak outside of the class (OO) and develop the grammar (OG) required to successfully give directions in English. Thus, it seems that classroom-based language instruction can develop students' level of communicative competence up to a certain point. From there, real-world communicative experiences are needed to further students' L2 development.

In summary, the results of this study should heighten language teachers' awareness to (a) the extent to which individual differences exist amongst learners; (b) the way in which task characteristics such as drawing upon previous knowledge and task repetition can help students develop positive perceptions of their L2 ability; and (c) the importance of incorporating real-world tasks into the course syllabus to facilitate further development in students' level of communicative competence. This study also creates a number of interesting questions requiring further consideration. Future research might compare the effects of different real-world tasks. How might learners' perceptions of their L2 performance differ between giving directions to the closest train station and buying theater tickets at a box office? Since the person selling tickets possesses most of the important information (i.e. ticket availability, price and so on), the impact of the interlocutor may be considerably different. Another interesting line of research would be investigating the influence of learners' perceptions on future L2 use. To what extent do positive perceptions lead to students actively seeking out opportunities to use their L2? Is the relationship between perceptions and future L2 use cyclical, where positive perceptions lead to greater L2 use which in turn develops more positive perceptions? Or, is there a point of diminishing returns?

This study sets the stage for a number of follow-up investigations to provide a more complete account of how learners' attributions influence second language learning and use. Undoubtedly future research in this area will build upon the findings of this study that second language learners' attributions are deeply rooted within their communicative context and vary amongst individuals. However, insights gained through this type of research not only raise language teachers' awareness of this important individual difference, but also provides concrete suggestions on how to adapt pedagogical tasks so that learners can develop positive perceptions about their level of L2 communicative competence.

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Appendix A

授業での練習により、知らない人に英語で方向を教えることに自信がもてるようになった

方向を教えるのに必要な単語をこの授業で学ぶことができた

授業中に方向を教える機会が十分にあったので、課外でも方向を教えられる自信があった

この授業での練習は、課外で方向をより流暢に教えるのに役立った

方向を教えるのに必要な文法を授業で学ぶことが出来た

私は一般的な語学力があると、とても自信を持っている

方向を教えるのに必要な英単語は知っていた

方向を教えるのに必要な英文法は知っていた

方向を教えるために素早く話す能力があった

パートナーに何を聞かれるか知らなかったことは、私が方向を上手く教えることに対し何の影響もなかった

話す相手のことを知っていることは、方向を上手く教える上で重要だ

パートナーが言ってることを理解するのに何の問題もなかった

パートナーの話す速度に何の問題もなかった

駅までの行き方を知っていたので、方向を教えることは簡単だった

2度目に方向を教えた時は1度目よりずっとうまく教えることが出来た

初めに地図なしで方向を教えるより、まず地図を用いて方向を教えた方が簡単だと思う

見ず知らずの人と話すのは興味深かったので、上手く方向を教えることが出来た

方向を教えるのは、授業でも課外でも変わりはない

地図なしに英語で方向を教えるのは簡単だった

地図を用いて英語で方向を教えるのは簡単だった