Learner conceptualizations of self-confidence in a Japanese EAP program

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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

CHALLENGING
LOOKING IN
LOOKING OUT
ASSUMPTIONS

This paper reports a preliminary qualitative study into how Japanese college EFL learners conceptualize the notion of self-confidence, or *jishin*, in their own language learning. Focusing on Japanese EFL learners in an intensive college EAP context, this study employed qualitative in-depth interviews in which the researchers served as collaborative interpreters of the stories told. Interviews of 60 to 90 minutes were conducted with 12 first year college students in their mother tongue of Japanese at the end of the academic year and participants were asked to reflect on what self-confidence means to them and how they felt self-confidence was related to their learning experience in the EAP program. The primary findings from the interviews were that the participants conceptualized self-confidence as a positive evaluation of self which is important in language learning, but at the same time, an attitude which should not be shown to others.

　本研究ではEAPにおける日本人大学生の英語学習者が言語学習における自信をどう捉えているかを考察する。研究方法として60分から90分の質的インタビューを日本語で行い、彼らにとって自信とはどういうものなのか、また自信がEAPにおける学習とどのように関連しているかという観点から分析を行った。その結果、自信とは自分に対する肯定的な評価であり、言語学習において重要なものであるが、同時に他人には見せるべきものではないと捉えていることが明らかになった。

The issue of learner self-confidence in L2 learning has been widely recognized and discussed among teachers and students alike, but the real nature of the phenomenon has not been fully described yet, especially in ways that are particularly relevant to L2 learning contexts. Certainly L2 self-confidence and its related constructs (e.g., self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem, or locus of control) have

been investigated in recent studies on language learning motivation (Dörnyei, 1994; Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991), but much of the research in this area has been largely quantitative or correlational in nature, aiming to find a measurable impact of a particular construct on achievement or proficiency, without fully addressing the fundamental questions on the nature of the phenomenon (Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001). As Moyer (2006) notes, self-confidence in SLA "is poorly understood as a construct, and has received little empirical validation up to now" (p. 267). Thus, in reaction to the relative paucity of research that delves into the nature of L2 self-confidence in a descriptive manner, this study employs a qualitative approach as a way of providing a more holistic picture of the phenomenon.

In addition, by focusing on Japanese learners of English, this study also tries to explore how their cultural background influences their self-perceptions as language learners, especially in terms of how they view and evaluate their own learning in a self-reflective manner. From a socio-cultural viewpoint, L2 learners' cultural frame of reference, including their own personal beliefs, values, and assumptions, acquired through their early socialization processes, may have a tremendous impact on how they perceive and interpret their own L2 learning experiences. As Markus and Kitayama (1991, p. 224) point out, construals of self and others, represented in different cultural perceptions of reality, "can influence, and in many cases determine, the very nature of individual experiences, including cognition, emotion, and motivation." In other words, culturally embedded concepts of self, which include how one relates to others

in the given social settings, naturally influence learners' conceptualizations of self-confidence in L2 learning and performance.

Review of relevant literature

In recent second language research, the learner's sense of confidence in second language learning has often been discussed as a specific set of self-perceptions of L2 competence based on feelings of efficacy (Leaver, Ehrman, & Shekhtman, 2005; Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994). According to Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, perceived self-efficacy is defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). In other words, perceptions of self-efficacy are not dependent on one's abilities or a set of skills that he or she already possesses but rather on one's personal judgment of what one believes may be accomplished with them. Bandura (1993, 1977) also noted the domain specific nature of self-efficacy, in contrast to a more general form of self-efficacy or self-confidence. For example, one can be generally confident in most situations or settings, but one may not necessarily have a sense of self-efficacy in specific situations or tasks (e.g., a language classroom or physics exam).

As Ehrman (1996) clearly notes, however, there is a good possibility that a sense of effectiveness in one or more specific areas of competence can overflow into one's general feelings of self-worth or self-value (i.e., self-esteem) and also that a lack of self-efficacy or an anticipatory sense of failure is likely to involve some anxiety, which often leads to reduced motivation as a consequence. Such a connection

to anxiety arousal within an individual clearly indicates that positive self-constructs such as self-efficacy and self-esteem are interrelated with negative counterparts such as anxiety or feelings of self-deprecating thoughts.

As seen so far, the construct of self-confidence or more specifically, self-efficacy and its related concepts certainly represent the complex nature of human psychology and behavior, the assumption being that "what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave" (Bandura, 1986, p. 25) and vice versa. But the question of how such general theories of self-constructs are related to specific educational contexts and second language learning in particular seems to need further investigation.

Within second language motivation research, Clement's model of L2 acquisition (Clement, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1986; Clement & Kruidenier, 1985) describes L2 self-confidence as "self-perceptions of communicative competence and concomitant low levels of anxiety in using the second language" (Noels et al., 1996, p. 255), which serves as "the most important determinant of attitude and effort expended toward L2 learning" (Clement et al., 1994, p. 422). Similarly, Tremblay & Gardner (1995), also have noted that the learner's self-efficacy is "an important antecedent to motivational behavior in language learning (e.g., persistence)" (as cited in Graham, 2004, p. 173). Certainly such studies on L2 motivation have incorporated a variety of learner affective variables (Clement, Dornyei & Noels, 1994; Clement, Gardner, & Smythe, 1980; Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997), but the connection between anxiety, confidence, and language learning has not been fully investigated, especially from a truly descriptive point of view.

In other words, the pertinence of each self-construct still remains to be fully established in terms of particular relevance to specific L2 learning contexts. As Dornyei (2001) and Ushioda (2001) clearly point out, more qualitative and interpretive approaches (e.g., in-depth interviews or case studies) need to be employed to further understand and explore "the internal dynamics of the intricate and multilevel construct of student motivation" (p. 49) in ways that encompass a variety of closely related constructs of learner self (e.g., learner self-confidence, self-concept, self-esteem, or self-identity).

Methodology

The context of the study

This study was conducted within an intensive EAP program at a four-year private liberal arts university located in the suburbs of Tokyo, Japan. Classes in the program focus on skills for critically reading and analyzing academic English texts, discussing and presenting opinions on issues, and writing academic research papers. Student motivation to improve English skills tends to be high, and the program applies a high level of pressure on students to achieve a level of academic English sufficient for participation in English-medium university courses at the university.

The participants

Fifteen Japanese students who had just completed their first year of study volunteered as participants for the study. All participants indicated their willingness to participate in response to a request for volunteers issued by the researchers

by email and in person to several intermediate (average TOEFL 450) and high-intermediate (average TOEFL 520) classes. At the time of volunteering, students were not informed of the details of the interview, and were only requested to volunteer for a sixty to ninety minute interview to reflect on their past year of study in the ELP. Interviews were conducted during spring break in March at the convenience of the participants.

Data collection

Data for this study was obtained solely by in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with the participants. As Dörnyei points out, "Interpretive techniques such as in-depth interviews or case studies are in many ways better suited to explore the internal dynamics" of multi-leveled constructs such as motivation, and "…the richness of qualitative data may also provide new slants on old questions" (2001 p.49). Each participant was interviewed by one of the researchers in the first language of the participants, Japanese, for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. For all interviews, a list of basic questions related to self-confidence was followed (See Appendix A), but care was taken to allow for flexibility, permitting participants to elaborate on and clarify feelings and episodes. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Japanese, and analyzed according to the procedure described below.

Data analysis

Rather than approaching the data with pre-determined categories, care was taken to allow naturalistic categories and patterns to emerge inductively from what the participants told us in relation to our research questions (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). First, the full transcripts of all participants were marked up by each of the researchers with an open coding system to indicate what types of concepts were expressed. Then, the sections related to the research questions were compiled into one set, and the researchers individually developed axial coding schemes of the main recurring patterns of ideas. Finally, after discussions among the researchers, a consensus on what patterns and themes were strongest in the data was reached, and representative and significant categories for organizing the data were decided. The main results that emerged from the data are presented below.

Findings

Here we will introduce the salient themes and insights regarding conceptualizations of learner self-confidence that emerged from the interviews. All quotations from the interviews are translations by the authors, and are preceded by a pseudonym used to mark the identity of the participants. Care was taken to render the original meaning of the participants' words in as literal a translation as possible.

One of the key interview questions was "To you, what does it mean to have confidence or not have confidence in learning or using English?" This question as well as other questions in the interview helped interviewees to express how they view the concept called *jishin* in Japanese in relation to their English learning. Interview responses

related to the conceptualization of self-confidence can be categorized into five themes of interest:

1. Confidence is perhaps more important than ability

2. Confidence is based on a positive evaluation of self

3. Confidence is not something to be shown or declared to others

4. Confidence in English is strongly linked to the ability to speak

5. Confidence as a language learner and as a language user seem to be different

Confidence is perhaps more important than ability

One key concept which occurred frequently in the interviews was the relationship between ability and self-confidence. For example, when asked which one he felt was more important, Tomoaki, a highly intelligent but relatively shy student, expressed his feelings as follows:

> I think confidence is more important than ability. If we lack confidence, we can't do our best. If we don't have confidence, we won't even try to say anything at all and that is not good for our improvement.

At the same time, Kyoko pointed out that levels of confidence must be linked to levels of ability.

> Confidence and ability have to be proportional. I don't want to have confidence that does not match my level of ability. I want confidence supported by a strong ability.

Some of the participants, however, often referred to more general types of self-confidence similar to the sense of self-esteem. As Mio noted:

> I don't think it so important to have confidence for a particular ability to do this and that, but rather I believe it's a matter of whether you can trust your own capability or potential. Even if you cannot speak fluently right now, for example, that's not something you should be ashamed of. To me it seems quite natural unless you have practiced it enough. So it's a kind of belief or self-conviction that I could be fluent in English someday if I'm actually given the opportunity to practice the skill a lot.

Confidence is based on a positive evaluation of self

A variety of responses from the participants pointed toward a conceptualization of *jishin* as being based on a positive evaluation of self. Looking back on all the experiences encountered in the first-year EAP program, many of the participants seem to have attained a sense of accomplishment, regardless of actual course grades or evaluations from others. Toshiko expressed her feelings of self-affirmation when she reflected:

> As I went though the first-year EAP program, I somehow came to recognize a positive attitude within myself, just because I've been working so hard, putting all my time and energy into my study! Although I couldn't always get the favorable grades or feedback that I had expected, I

now feel that I'd like to praise myself for what I've done in the program. I think, to get the desirable outcome is one thing, and to value the fact that I've done my best is quite another. Years ago, I couldn't allow myself to ever be content about myself unless I got some tangible results, such as high test scores or class grades, but I may have changed my perspective or attitude toward myself in such a competitive learning environment. Now I believe the process really counts, even if I can't necessarily get the desirable outcomes. Maybe I've become a bit lenient toward myself, but I certainly feel a sense of accomplishment, accompanied by a feeling of progress and growth not only as a language learner, but rather as a person.

Confidence is not something to be shown or declared to others

Japanese culture has been characterized as valuing self-deprecation for the purpose of achieving harmony within the social group; not surprisingly, several responses in the interviews were related to this aspect of self-confidence in Japanese culture. As the following excerpts show, when asked, "Are you confident in your English now?" almost all participants answered in the negative. Risa and Kyoko put their views as follows:

> As Japanese, we don't declare that we are confident, right. Even students in Program C (the advanced class with high TOEFL scores) will say they have no confidence in their English. But, of course, what we say in public and what we feel inside may be different.
>
> If we say something like "I'm confident in my English," then we might be held responsible for that. It is better to not say it because it could be embarrassing or shameful. If someone asks me "Do you speak good English?" I won't say "Yes."

Similarly, Takafumi and Kaai, who seemed to be more outspoken and expressive than most students, pointed out the necessity of being humble-minded and self-effacing toward one's ability or competence. They also said that the sense of *jishin* or self-confidence in Japanese is socially constructed through consideration of one's relationships with others. Takafumi made an interesting comment on the notion of *jishin* in reference to Japanese cultural standards:

> I cannot say that I'm truly confident unless I'm perfect in all the aspects in concern. That's surely impossible and unlikely, so the state of being unsatisfied or unconfident seems quite natural, and being fully confident about oneself is not necessarily something desirable or expected in the first place. I rather believe one's self-confidence is not something to be attained, but rather something to be given as a consequence, because a sense of *jisonshin* or self-esteem seems to come from outside of oneself and is largely determined by current social needs or expectations.

Confidence in English is strongly linked to the ability to speak

One overwhelmingly popular response to the question of "in language learning, what is confidence to you" was the ability to speak naturally and without hesitation. Naoya expressed his feelings as follows:

> For me, confidence means the ability to speak. My friends tell me my speaking skill is not bad, but I cannot speak naturally, so I am not confident. When I am able to communicate everything that I want to communicate, I think I can have confidence. My English speaking ability has improved, but I am not confident in it.

Satoko reflected a similar sentiment:

> I would say that having confidence in English means being able to use English freely, just like a mother-tongue. Until that level is reached, some degree of anxiety is unavoidable.

Thus, native-like oral proficiency seems to be part of the conceptualization of self-confidence in language learning for these language learners. As for why the oral aspect of foreign language proficiency is dominant, Yosuke's following comment provides some insight:

> In speaking, you can immediately know the result. You can know whether your English is clear or not, right there on the spot, just by the reaction of the other person.

In other words, the speed of feedback may be one main reason why confidence equals speaking in the minds of learners. Good speaking can lead to immediate positive feedback from the interlocutor, and can quickly contribute to higher confidence in the language.

Confidence as a language learner and as a language user

Most of the participants, who had already attained a certain level of confidence in their knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, seemed to distinguish self-confidence as a learner of English from self-confidence as a language user. In the interviews, they often compared their current perspectives on L2 confidence with their previously held beliefs on language learning. For example, Sakiko's account represents such a perspective change through her experiences in the first-year EAP program, especially in comparison to her previous self-perceptions in junior high and senior high school:

> When asked if I have confidence in English, I would say I do have some as a language learner, because I used to get pretty good grades in English as a subject in high school. In a sense, I was quite proud of myself and no doubt confident about getting high scores in grammar and reading comprehension tests offered in entrance exam preparation courses. But now I wonder, "Where has my unwavering confidence gone?" As I went through the first year EAP courses, where English is just a tool for doing the given tasks, I found it quite a difference to have confidence in language study and to have confidence in actually using

English for real communication or other purposes. So I feel I need to build another type of confidence not as a successful language learner, but as an effective language user.

Similarly, Nao commented on an uneasy feeling of emotional distress when faced with reality:

My sense of pride, which derives from being an excellent student in my high school, seems to have virtually shattered when I found myself being hesitant and incompetent in class discussions. Even if I had an opinion to express, I'd often become hesitant for fear of losing face as a competent and successful language learner. No wonder I cannot possibly build up my confidence with such a negative attitude! Maybe I was trying to avoid facing the reality, but I came to realize that my perceived sense of competence as a language learner would not necessarily lead to my confidence as an effective language user, especially unless I would throw away my well-established sense of pride and start over again.

Kaai also echoed that view:

In high school, English was one of my favorite subjects, and I always got excellent grades in translation exercises and grammar & reading tests as well. So I think I maintained a certain level of confidence as one of the best students in class. But now what here in the ELP? English as a tool!? In the spring term, I was dumfounded to know the fact that we're expected not just to study English

but rather to use it for academic purposes. I was so used to studying English as one of the subjects in a sort of receptive manner that I was literally at a loss in a totally new learning environment. It's like losing the well-established inner criteria for my confidence!

Drastic changes in learning contexts from traditional grammar-based EFL settings to a more content-based English for academic purposes program, thus, may have exerted a tremendous impact on their perspectives on L2 self-confidence, as well as their beliefs on language learning in general.

Discussion and implications

Based on the insights gained from the findings, some implications for second language teaching can be drawn, especially as to the role of the language teacher in helping the students develop and maintain their self-confidence in a collaborative manner. One of the important findings was that the participants' cultural frame of reference had a tremendous impact on the ways in which they would conceptualize the notion of self-confidence in L2 learning and performance. As illustrated in many of the participants' self-reflective accounts, their sense of confidence seems to be based not so much on their individual judgments of efficacy in a specific task, but rather as an overall appraisal of their self-worth (i.e., self-esteem) or potential capabilities in relation to others. Such an interdependent construal of self and self-efficacy naturally suggests inherent difficulties that they might face in building up their sense of confidence in L2 learning, if solely based on their own personal judgments

of efficacy without consulting with immediate social situations or expectations.

In some cultural contexts, such as in Japan, where maintaining group harmony is an important social value, it is considered undesirable or unacceptable for talented students to assert their qualities or abilities so that they stand out from their peers (Tsui, 1995). In other words, those learners who have internalized such culturally-based classroom norms might be afraid of not only losing face due to making mistakes but of being resented by their peers for outperforming others, thus violating acceptable cultural norms. This kind of culturally based psyche might be unfamiliar to some ESL teachers, unless they share the same socio-cultural norms with their students.

Such a cultural insight into the highly affective nature of second language learning, thus, also indicates the impact of the learners' cultural backgrounds on their conceptions of L2 self-confidence (i.e., what it means to them as a second language learner) and its development. As Hinkel (1999) notes, second language learning necessarily involves readjustments in terms of both linguistic and cultural systems acquired through L1 socialization processes. Persistent influences of L1 culture, thus, can be manifested not so much in the linguistic transfer as in the level of pragmatic appropriateness that accords with tacit agreements held in the L2 community (Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1989; Saville-Troike, 1989).

With this regard, it can be said that language teachers need to raise their own awareness as to not only the differences of the cultural backgrounds that the students will bring to the language classroom, but also the uniquely different ways of cultural perception that they utilize in making sense out of the reality around them.

Conclusion

Based on in-depth interviews with the twelve participants, this paper has presented findings on how Japanese college students in an EAP program seem to conceptualize the notion of self-confidence in language learning. As the results of the interviews indicate, the participants' perspectives on the notion of self-confidence in L2 learning are certainly multi-faceted and diverse, reflecting their individually different perceptions of reality in a given learning context (i.e., a Japanese college EAP setting). But at the same time, the commonality among them as a group of Japanese learners of English also seems to suggest a tremendous impact of their cultural perceptions on how they conceptualize L2 confidence. In future studies, a variety of approaches, both qualitative and quantitative, seem necessary to fully understand the complex nature of the role of self-confidence in language learning.

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Appendix A

Some sample interview questions asked in Japanese. [With English translations]

I. プロフィール [Profile]

- 専攻は？ [What's your major?]

- 英語学習暦は？（留学経験・海外滞在など）[What's your history of learning English? (Study abroad, living abroad etc.)]

- ＩＣＵに入ろうと思ったきっかけは？[Why did you decide to come to ICU?]

- ＴＯＥＦＬ・英検などのスコアは？[Do you have a TOEFL or STEP score?]

- 日頃英語を使う機会は、過去、現在においてどうか？ [Daily English use?]

- ＩＣＵに来る前の英語に対する見方は？[What was your view of English before coming to ICU?]

II. 現在 [Current State]

- 今、英語に自信があると言えるか？[Do you have confidence in your English?]

- 英語に自信がある・ないと言った場合、どういう意味か？[What do you mean when you say you "have confidence" or "do not have confidence"?]

- 技能面においてはどうか？（話す・書く・読む・聴く・その他）[How is your confidence in each skill area?

(speaking, writing, reading, listening etc.)]

• どんな事をどうすれば自信があると言えるか？ [What would you say contributes to having confidence?]

III. 過程 [Changes in the EAP Program]

• ＥＬＰの１０ヶ月の中で英語に対する自信に変化はあったのか？[How did your confidence change over the past 10 months in the ELP?]

• 春・秋・冬、それぞれの学期において何が印象に残ったか？出来事・エピソードなどがあれば。[In spring, autumn, and winter terms in the ELP, what events or episodes left an impression on you?]

• どんな要素が影響していると思うか？[What factors do you feel influence confidence?]

• （振り返ってみて）もしこうすれば、もっと自信がついたと思うことは？[Looking back, what do you think you could have done to increase your confidence more?]

IV. 未来 [The Future]

• 英語学習者・英語堪能者として、自信をつけるには何が大切か？なぜそう思うか？[As an English learner or user, what do you feel is important for gaining in confidence?]

• もし「自信がない」という同級生がいたら、どうアドバイスするか？[If you were to give advice to a classmate who lacks confidence, what kind of advice would you give?]

V.その他 [Other Questions]

• 「自信」はどう定義するか？ [How would you define "confidence"?]

• あなたにとって「自信」は大切なものですか？[Is confidence important to you?]

• 「自信」と聴くとどういうイメージを持ちますか？[What comes to mind when you hear the word "confidence"?]