

The Fear of Making Errors in JSL Acquisition

Keiko Nonaka

Daito Bunka University

I. Introduction

The terminology "fear of making errors" is used to describe the phenomenon of a learner's feeling of sounding silly or funny in trying out the target language (Hatch, 1985; Krashen, 1982; Schumann, 1978). In particular, does fear of making errors influence attitudes towards second language acquisition, as apparent from the learner's inclination either to seek out or avoid communicative opportunities? Within the limited scope of the study, it was hypothesized that those who have more interaction with native speakers may well show positive attitudes, and thus use positive interactional communication strategies (CS); and that negative attitudes would similarly be reflected in the use of negative CS. Thus, the purpose of this study was to find out what kinds of positive oral CS or interactional features learners with less fear displayed, and what sorts of negative attitudes were displayed by those with more fear.

In order to investigate the correlation between the subjects' fear of making errors and their strategic communication features, results of survey questionnaires were analyzed according to five criteria. These were: (a) a measure of the rate of the subject's current ability to use Japanese; (b) a measure of their degree of participation in Japanese culture and society, which might be equivalent to the degree of assimilation to the target language and culture (society as a whole); (c) a measure of the actual amount of time spent using the target language, Japanese; (d) a measure of their degree of fear of making errors in Japanese; and (e) their ages as well as their length of stay in the target society, Japan. In particular, (b) and (c) were considered to reveal their types of motivation (i.e., integrative or instrumental, as in Gardner & Lambert, 1972) and acculturation in the target language and society.

In terms of their previous language-learning experience or background, the kinds of learning environments might also have to be taken into account in determining the reasons for various features and phenomena observed in the subjects' spoken/written production. That is, what learning situations or environments affect the subjects' degree of fear of making errors as well as their characteristic features of production? Is there an actual influence of type of motivation, or learning environment, on language acquisition? How have the subjects learned or been taught the target language? Answers to these questions were elicited during telephone interviews.

In an attempt to investigate the correlation between the nature of foreign language acquisition by adult learners and their fear of making errors, two experimental studies were done—investigating both English as a Second Language (ESL) in the United States and Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) learners in relation to their degree of fear of making errors. The discussion here will concentrate mainly on the results of the data for the JSL learners, with occasional reference to a previous ESL study (Nonaka, 1990).

2. The Study

The research focused on the subjects' "fear of making errors" in their second language, Japanese, and its possible correlation with seven other variables, namely, age, length of stay in Japan, self-reported proficiency level, extent of participation in the target culture, hours spent weekly on interaction in the target language, and characteristics of spoken and written target language (TL) production. Utilizing an ex post facto design, the research was designed to "look at the type and/or degree of relationship between the . . . variables" (Hatch & Farhady, 1982, p. 26).

The subjects were nine English-speaking women residents of Japan, chosen from several metropolitan areas including Kobe, Kyoto, Osaka, Nagoya, and Tokyo. Their ages ranged from 20 to 49, their length of stay from 6 months to 20 years, and their nationalities included American, British, Canadian, Irish, and Australian. Unlike subjects in an earlier study (Nonaka, 1990), their purposes for staying in Japan were self-oriented, due to their occupations, interests, or other independent goals. The subjects were limited to those who had had at least 300 hours of in-class language training; thus the research dealt only with subjects considered to be roughly equivalent in their proficiency level—either high-intermediate or low-advanced.

Each subject was asked to fill out a questionnaire in English designed to elicit the degree of fear of making errors, as well as age, length of stay in Japan, self-reported proficiency level in Japanese, extent of participation in Japanese culture, and hours spent weekly on interaction in Japanese. The analysis of the subjects' oral production in Japanese was based on informal telephone interviews. In order to elicit characteristics of written production, each subject was also asked to translate a story and five additional sentences from English into Japanese.

3. Results and Discussion

Subjects identified themselves with one of the following five levels:

- Level 1: Subjects who think it is good to make errors.
- Level 2: Subjects who do not mind making errors at all.
- Level 3: Subjects who do not mind making errors as much.
- Level 4: Subjects who want to avoid making errors as much as possible.
- Level 5: Subjects who always want to avoid making errors.

Table 1 shows the number of subjects identifying themselves with each level in both the present JSL study and the earlier ESL study (Nonaka, 1990).

Table 1.
Number of Subjects at Each Proficiency Level

Level	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
JSL Subjects	1	1	3	3	1	9
ESL Subjects	0	3	6	4	0	13

Interestingly, the JSL subjects ranged from one extreme to the other, whereas the Japanese ESL learners chose only the three intermediate levels. Unlike any Japanese ESL learner, one JSL learner felt that making errors is actually a good thing, although at the same time there was one who felt that errors should be avoided at all costs. The one level 1 subject was identified as 1A, the one level 2 subject as 2A, the three level 3 subjects as 3A, 3B, and 3C, and so forth. Figure 1, on the following two pages, shows how the subjects responded to questions 1 to 5 of the questionnaire, the characteristics of their written production, and features observed during the five-minute oral interviews. Figure 1 also notes the purpose of each subject's stay in Japan.

There was no evidence of correlation between fear of making errors and (a) age, (b) length of stay in Japan, (c) self-reported proficiency level, (d) extent of participation in Japanese culture, and (e) hours of interaction in Japanese each week. The results for variables (b) and (c) are similar to those found for Japanese ESL learners in the U. S. (Nonaka, 1990), but are different for (a), (d), and (e).

The younger (20s) JSL subjects ranged from levels 1 to 5 with regard to fear of making errors, while the older subjects (40s) ranged from levels 2 to 4.

Regarding length of stay, it may be noted that the subject with the greatest fear of making errors (5A) was also the one who had come to Japan the most recently—only a half-year before the study, in fact. One can only wonder if her concern about error-making was related to her relative newness to the

Figure 1.
Descriptive Data on the JSL Subjects

Subj.	Age	Years in Japan	Proficiency	Extent of Participation	Hrs/week Interaction	Purpose in Japan	Features of written production	Features of oral production
1A	20s	5	very good	frequent	50	graduate study	almost no performance errors in the use of the orthography	many natural expressions and colloquialisms; informal language use; use of pause fillers
2A	40s	8	good to fair	frequent	1-10	EFL teaching and Zen	total lack of writing skills	no use of particles; adopting L1 word order in L2 speech; some colloquial, familiar, and informal expressions; frequent use tag-question marker <i>ne</i>
3A	20s	2	(very) good	extensive	17+	EFL teaching	almost no performance errors in the use of the orthography, except for the failure to show consonant doubling	frequent use of idiomatic expressions; frequent lack of particle use; incomplete sentences and short utterances, such as set/fixed phrases; pause fillers
3B	30s	2.5	fair	infrequent	1-2	EFL teaching	ability to translate colloquial sentences but not literary text	basic level of speech with one- or two-word utterances and phrases
3C	40s	17.5	very good	frequent	many	EFL teaching	<i>kanji</i> (characters) used only for more basic words	much use of idiomatic expressions and polite ways of speaking as well as informal colloquialisms; variety in terms of levels and registers of speech; pause fillers
4A	20s	4	good	moderate	2-4	EFL teaching	<i>kanji</i> used only for a few basic words	frequent use of colloquial expressions; proper and appropriate use of formal and informal expressions; use of negative pause-fillers <i>aa-aa</i> , <i>sou-sou</i>

Figure 1.
Descriptive Data on the JSL Subjects (Continued)

Subj.	Age	Years in Japan	Proficiency	Extent of Participation	Hrs/week Interaction	Purpose in Japan	Features of written production	Features of oral production
4B	40s	8	good	infrequent	1-2	business and EFL teaching	intermediate level use of <i>kanji</i> with no mistakes; some mistakes in <i>kana</i> (syllabaries); correct presentation of English loan words; accurate penmanship	appropriate use of various registers, but with more frequent use of informal and colloquial expressions than of formal language; proper use of politeness; prevalence of longer, more complete sentences; used pause-fillers such as <i>aa-aa</i> , <i>sou-sou</i> ; best presentation of a humorous story
4C	40s	10	good	frequent	10-15	EFL teaching	exclusive use of formal and archaic style of language; advanced level of <i>kanji</i> use	very natural formal and polite spoken language; most frequent use of pause-fillers, formal/informal and natural-sounding colloquial expressions
5A	20s	0.5	very good	infrequent	70*	study and journalism	high intermediate use of <i>kanji</i> ; correct presentation of English loan words	very natural-sounding colloquial expressions; use of pause-fillers; errors in verb conjugations and particles; use of polite forms rather than very informal colloquial language

*5A's 70 hours per week include watching television and 20 to 30 hours of formal Japanese study.

country, and to a more general anxiety about coping with a new language and culture. It might be that her concern about errors would decrease over time.

Those who described themselves as having relatively frequent participation in Japanese culture also described themselves as having 10 hours a week or more of interaction in Japanese. Those with less participation generally had less than 10 hours a week of interaction, with one obvious exception, 5A, as shown in the footnote to Figure 1.

With regard to oral production characteristics, those who have had many chances to interact in the TL (1A, 3A, 3C, 4C, 5A) tended to use simple yet natural-sounding pause-fillers—such as “*anoo*,” “*maa*,” and “*chottoo*”—in their spoken interaction; these are roughly equivalent to such English expressions as “I mean,” “let me see,” and “let me think about it a moment.” Those subjects also knew when and how to use such colloquial expressions as “*ja-nakute*” or “*ja-nakutte*” and “*unn, dakedo*” to express the adversarial cases, which would be approximated in English by “well,” “it’s not,” and “however.” By contrast, those with very little interaction (3B, 4A, 4B) did not seem familiar with such positive pause fillers and colloquial expressions, but filled pauses with such expressions as “*aa, aa*” and “*sou, sou*” (known as *aizuchi* in Japanese), which do little more than signify that the listener is paying attention.

In general, those who had longer exposure to Japanese culture and language showed more natural discourse patterns and markers than those who did not, as evidenced by their natural and effective use of such colloquial expressions as “*anmari kiita-koto nai-to omoi-masu-kedo*” (“I don’t think I’ve heard much about it”); “*nan-te iu-n(o)-desu-ka*” (“What do you call it?”); “*ee soo-desu-ne*” (“Yes, I think so.”); and “. . . *shitai-kara*” (“. . . because I feel like . . .”). On the other hand, those with little actual interaction in Japanese (3B, 4B) showed only a rather formal or polite style of spoken Japanese.

It was particularly interesting to find that the JSL learners generally took a positive attitude, trying to ask questions whenever they did not understand what their partner said. This is why quite a few instances of interrogative discourse markers, such as “*eigo kudasai*” (“Please give me an English translation”) or “*nan-te iu-no-desu-ka*” (“What do you call it in English?”) were used as positive strategies.

Finally, in written production, there was a direct relationship between length of stay and skill at translation.

4. Concluding Remarks

The use of pause-fillers correlated with the amount of exposure to the target language and culture, and subjects displayed more diversity in producing various positive pause-fillers. Some observations can be made:

1. A vital factor for the attainment of natural language, including its colloquial usage and politeness features, seems to be whether or not a learner had sufficient immersion in the target culture to master the practical phase of language manipulation.
2. The aspect of motivation is also significant, for the kinds of language people learn or acquire can be influenced by the sort of motivation they have.

Moreover, the problem of learning environment is another critical issue. The JSL learners tended to show diversity in their acquisition patterns, regardless of the similarity of their purposes for being in Japan. This may reflect the individualism of Western education, in addition to the varied purposes, length of stay, and non-standard curriculum. Furthermore, the fact that ESL and JSL learners showed different patterns in terms of the correlation between their degree of fear of making errors and their use of pause-fillers could be due to the fact that their motivations and learning styles were different, together with their different cultural backgrounds.

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at JALT '90, Omiya, Japan, November 1990, and TESOL '91, New York City, March 1991.

References

- Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (Eds.). (1972). *Attitude and motivation in second language learning*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Hatch, E. M. (1985). Personal communication at LSA/TESOL Summer Institute, Georgetown University, Washington, DC.
- Hatch, E. M., & Farhady, H. (1982). *Research design and statistics for applied linguistics*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Nonaka, K. (1990). The Fear of making errors. *Cross Currents*, 17(1), 29-36.
- Schumann, J. H. (1978). The acculturation model for second language acquisition. In R. C. Gingras (Ed.), *Second language acquisition and foreign language learning* (pp. 27-50). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

ScottForesman English

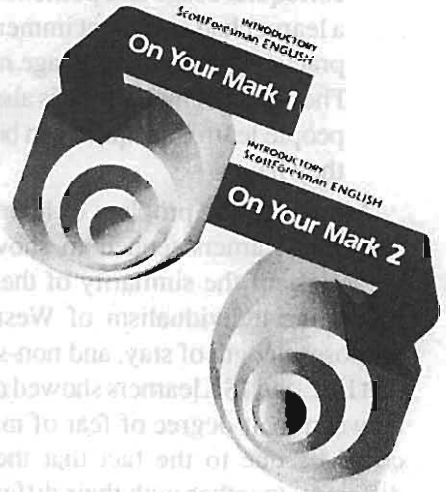
Junior High Students to Adults

NEW!

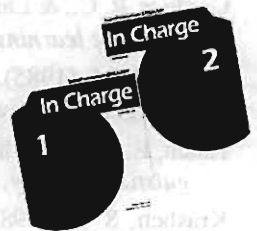
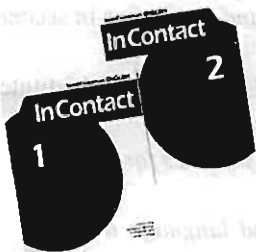
On Your Mark

Level: Junior high school

Stock in Japan January 1994



In Contact, 1 & 2 On Target, 1 & 2 In Charge, 1 & 2



For more information contact:

David Gray
HarperCollins Publishers
1-2-1 Sarugakucho
Chiyoda-Ku
Tokyo 101, Japan

Tel: 03-3291-6343/6344
Fax: 03-3294-8284



ScottForesman

A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers