

# THE CONFIDENCE FACTOR: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE INTERACTION OF SELF-CONFIDENCE AND ACCURACY IN TEST PERFORMANCE AMONG A GROUP OF JAPANESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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## *Abstract*

In this study of a group of adult Japanese learners of English in the United States, an attempt is made to discover the relationship between confidence and accuracy in answering test items. The crucial aspect of confidence under investigation was considered to be a reflection of the language learner's perception of his or her knowledge. The students were required to answer 50 test items and to indicate, on a 5 point scale for each item, how sure they were of their answers. Generally, the average confidence ratings were found to be higher on correct answers than on wrong answers. However, two other patterns emerged on a number of items which indicated "non-confident correct answering" and "very confident wrong answering." The study shows that the as-

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Research of this type would not be possible without the willing participation of the subjects, in this case, the twenty Japanese learners of English whose help and cooperation we gratefully acknowledge. Nor would it be possible without the advice and support of a number of our colleagues at the University of Minnesota – Helen Jorstad, Kim Koffolt, Lora Polack, Tom Richards, Elaine Tarone and Jerry Yanz. Responsibility for whatever is found to be misguided or poorly expressed rests, of course, with us.

sumption of a straightforward relationship between accuracy and confidence in answering test items may be misguided. Implications for language teaching and the interpretation of test results are discussed.

There is a largely unexplored assumption held by many language teachers that a student's accuracy in answering a test item reflects knowledge, and inaccuracy reflects lack of knowledge. We rarely stop to consider if there is any relationship between the accuracy or inaccuracy of the answers a student chooses on a test and how sure the student is of the accuracy of those answers. Yet, we would probably be rather worried if it turned out to be the case that some learners were choosing correct answers with no confidence whatsoever, and choosing wrong answers with a great deal of confidence. In order to discover whether this is, in fact, a cause for concern, an exploratory study was carried out with twenty Japanese learners of English currently in the U.S.A. Since the key consideration in this investigation was the element of self-confidence, we should first explain just how we viewed this one important, yet little studied, affective variable in the learning process.

### **Self-confidence**

If it is mentioned at all in approaches to language teaching, the role of positive self-confidence is usually associated with successful language learning. Beebe (1983) suggests that most good learners have "a healthy self-esteem" which keeps them from thinking that their errors make them look foolish. Krashen (1982) lists self-confidence as one of the three im-

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portant affective variables in relation to his affective filter hypothesis, the other two being anxiety and motivation. He suggests elsewhere (1981) that self-confidence enables a person to encourage intake, or useful input, and to have a lower affective filter.

Brown also suggests that “a person with high self-esteem is able to reach out beyond himself more freely, to be less inhibited, and because of his ego strength, to make the necessary mistakes involved in language learning with less threat to his ego” (1977: 352). He argues that self-esteem “could have everything to do with success in learning a language” (1973: 233). With this in mind, we should not be surprised to find that lack of self-confidence is usually associated with unsuccessful learners. Naiman et al. (1975), as quoted by Krashen (1981), report that teachers felt that poor learners lacked self-confidence.

In one of the few reported attempts to study the effects of confidence, Kleinmann (1977; 1978) investigated avoidance among 24 native speakers of Arabic, 13 Spanish speakers and 2 Portuguese speakers, all studying ESL at the University of Pittsburgh. Four English structures were tested: (1) passive voice (2) infinitive complements (3) direct object pronouns in sentences containing an infinitive (4) the present progressive. On the basis of contrastive analysis, it was predicted that Arabic speakers would find (1) and (4) difficult, while Spanish and Portuguese speakers would find (2) and (3) difficult.

Subjects were given a multiple-choice comprehension test on these structures (except direct object pronouns), an adapted version of the Achievement Anxiety Test, the Success-Failure Inventory, and an indirect preference assessment task in which the above four structures were elicited orally by pictures or by verbal cues. They also rated their confidence in each of their answers on the comprehension test on a 5 point scale.

The results reveal that what was predicted to be difficult of each group of speakers was indeed generally avoided in the oral elicitation task by that group (with the exception of the present progressive). However, within a group, production in the oral task of structures which otherwise would be avoided seemed to be influenced by affective variables such as confidence, facilitative anxiety and motivational orientation. There was a significant correlation between confidence in the comprehension of the passive voice and production of that structure within the Arabic group. Kleinmann (1977) suggests that a learner's choice to avoid or not to avoid the use of a structure might be affected by confidence. However, the concept of confidence proposed here is not a reflection of the individual's knowledge of some structure, but rather a reflection of the learner's perception of his knowledge, which is not necessarily correct. We shall return to this concept later.

Murakami (1980) also investigated possible behavioral and attitudinal correlates of proficiency in listening and reading for 30 Japanese students studying at Southern Illinois University. A self-report questionnaire, a modified dictation procedure and a cloze test were administered. The correlation coefficients between self-rating of speaking and listening skills reported on the two tests are as follows:

	dictation	cloze	total
Self-rating of speaking skill	.69	.51	.67
Self-rating of listening skill	.38	.32	.39

(p=.05)

It is interesting to notice that the self-rating of speaking ability is more closely correlated with the two test results than is the rating of listening skill. There is a clue here that, for these Japanese students at least, their perception of their listening abilities was a relatively inaccurate reflection of

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their general ability to use the language.

It may also be worth noting here that some recent work in the area of speech perception has also focused on the confidence ratings of (native English-speaking) subjects asked to identify speech sounds and words. The work of Yanz (1984) and Yanz and Anderson(1984) has suggested that we may not gain an accurate picture of the abilities of hearers to recognize what they hear if we simply ask them to identify words. If subjects are asked to assess the accuracy of their identifications, it is argued, we may gain insight into what the subjects treat as communication difficulties despite their recognition skills. In simple terms, language-users may identify a word correctly, yet their lack of confidence in that identification may lead them to put little faith in their interpretation of what they think the speaker said. Alternatively, they may make wrong identifications very confidently and be led to a false certainty that they understand what the speaker said. In both cases, they will experience communication problems, yet the source of those problems may remain obscure, if the confidence factor is not explored.

Apart from a few other studies involving second language learners (e.g. Mueller & Miller, 1970; Parsons 1983; Samuels & Griffore, 1979 ), there have not been many empirical studies conducted on the self-confidence issue. What does become apparent, however, is the need to maintain a clear distinction between the effect of confidence as a personality trait ( which is very difficult to measure) and the effect of confidence, more narrowly defined as 'the learner's perception of his or her knowledge.' It is this latter concept which we set out to investigate in the study reported here.

### Design of the Test

The test devised contained 4 sections: (1) a listening exercise



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we would anticipate that the sounds in contrast here would be quite distinct. In fact, all 20 subjects answered this item correctly.

However, the /l/ and /r/ phonemic contrast in English is generally believed to be tricky for Japanese learners, so we would predict that the following item might cause problems:

It was a big \_\_\_\_\_.

**lock**  
**rock**

Notice that there are no syntactic or semantic clues in the sentence. In fact, fewer than half of the subjects got this one correct.

A range of other contrasts were used in this part. Those which provided significant results are discussed in detail later.

### Part 2

In this section, fairly idiomatic English expressions were included in short dialogs on tape. Here is an example of one dialog, followed by the answers the subject had to choose from on the answer sheet.

Speaker A: Hey John, did you pass the test?

Speaker B: You must be joking.

- (a) John is sure he passed
- (b) John is not sure if he passed or not
- (c) John is sure he did not pass

The items in this section depend on some knowledge of colloquial/spoken English and we predicted that the subjects