The Shyness Myth

「内気」の実態

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Abstract：It is a common held belief among many English foreign language（EFL）teachers that Japanese students' reluctance to fully engage in the language learning process constitutes a major hurdle to their language development. What it does not recognize is that for many Japanese students they are simply unprepared for a lesson style that fundamentally differs from their education experience. Their expectations and learning experience differ from those of EFL teachers, as a result, students need to be taught what is expected of them, and more importantly, the skills that are required in order to improve their communicative competence. Only when equipped with the tools will students be able to make linguistic progress.

Keywords：shyness, Japanese students, communicative language approach

抄　録：日本人学生の言語学習の上での重要な問題は，言語学習に対する「やる気の無さ」にあるという，多くの EFL 教師の中で共通する見解がある。しかし，これは，日本人学生がこれまでに受けてきた教育と，EFL 教師の行う授業スタイルとが根本的に異なったものであるため，EFL 教師の授業スタイルに日本人学生が慣れていない。或いはついて行けない，ということを認識していない上での見解である。日本人学生にとっての授業の受け方，学び方や，これまでの実際の学習経験は，EFL 教師が考えるものとは違っているのである。そのため，日本人学生は授業の中でするべきこと，要求されていることが何であるかを分からなければならないし，最も重要なのは，言語習得に欠かせない学び方の‘技’を身に付けなければならないのである。それらが備われば，学生は言語学習の上で能力を伸ばすことが出来るのであろう。

キーワード：内気，日本人学生，話好きな言語アプローチ

Introduction

It is generally recognized that shyness (in its various forms) can pose such an impediment for Japanese language students, that it is imperative for them to attempt to minimize its influence. However, while many would agree that it is possible to label Japanese students 'shy', 'reticent', and 'quiet', without clear proposals how to address this 'handicap' (Doyon, 2000) such labeling only serves to reinforce certain negative stereotypes. The real implications that need to be addressed are the traits which are manifestations of shyness in the classroom. It is how this emotion interferes with the language learning process that is most relevant to EFL teachers, since teaching in foreign cultures can potentially lead to problems of communication and even conflict due to certain cultural misunderstandings.

The significance of shyness in the learning of a second language is illustrated in the five traits（Wadden, 1993）which EFL teachers in Japan cite as problematic in the classroom. They are that Japanese students：

1．Rarely initiate discussion
2．Avoid raising new topics
3．Do not challenge the teacher
4．Seldom ask questions
5．Are reluctant to volunteer answers

If we categorize shyness as a cultural phenomenon, it illustrates people from divergent cultures react differently to certain situations, making the cultural basis of the teacher-student relationship fundamentally difficult, not least because：

'teaching to a student or student body with a cognitive profile different from what the teacher is accustomed to is evidently problematic' (Hofstede, 1986)

Although these traits could be used to reinforce the shyness myth, more tellingly, they represent learning traditions unique to collectivist countries such as Japan. A different teaching approach (i.e. the communicative approach used by many EFL teachers) therefore necessitates the need for 'a sound, culturally sensitive foundation' (Jones, 1995) that recognises these differences and attempts to incorporate the different ways of learning. One of the first tasks includes addressing student's preconceptions about their role in the classroom.

Students' expectations

The classroom will not always be seen as a meeting place between students' expectations and pedagogical appropriateness, due to contrasting teacher / student beliefs of what is expected (Matsuda, 2003). The teacher-centered nature of the Japanese education system shapes and maintains students' beliefs and concepts they hold in regard to the learning process (Wenden, 1991).

These expectations are recognized as a potentially significant element when making the transition to the apparent 'randomness' of communicative language classes (Bowen, 2004). For many Japanese students, their experience of what constitutes 'appropriate' behavior is applied to their new language class, resulting in expectations of teacher-centered and rote-learning, rather than independent, creative, autonomous learning. This can often lead to difficulty when students are asked to perform independent, creative, autonomous activities, leading some to even question whether they should complete speaking exercises in English or Japanese! Instances of student concern or dissatisfaction are therefore likely to surface whenever instructional activities are inconsistent with these preconceived beliefs (Burden, 2002). When students become aware of this discrepancy between expectation and

what is actually happening, if unfulfilled, they may result in what are termed 'hotspots' (Linde in Woods, 1996). These type of false assumptions and prejudices which underlie their attitude towards their role must be changed, a process Holec (1981) terms 'de-conditioning'.

Other problems students can encounter include certain psychological blocks or other inhibiting affects, feelings of alienation, frustration, and even anger (Brown, 1994). From the author's experience these are feelings which affect many Japanese students, especially those participating in group classes, where extra pressure from other group members exists. Furthermore, the author has often observed Japanese students writing their answers during speaking activities, instead of using the time more productively, as students assume papers will be checked and that having the 'correct' answer is paramount. Others quickly complete speaking exercises, as opposed to using the tasks as a means to communicate and develop their linguistic proficiency. These 'mismatches' (Rausch, 2000) clearly illustrate that students and teachers do not share the same understanding of what compromises 'proper classroom behavior'. Nunan concurs that:

> no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner's subjective needs and perception relating to the processes of learning are taken into account. (Nunan, 1989)

It is therefore imperative to address these erroneous beliefs to minimize any resistance to a new teaching approach (Wenden, 1991).

Several of the traits (see page 29) are not due to inherent shyness, but merely due to students' unfamiliarity to an environment which requires skills they have little practice in. Therefore, their knowledge and attitude (Jones, 1995) are the key to language success, and involving them in the collaborative process through incorporating their cognitive and learning style preferences is an

essential element.

The learning style

In a country such as Japan, which values conformity and group feelings over individual expression, trying to inspire some kind of rigorous challenge or competitive interaction can sometimes prove frustrating. Japanese students tend to value consensus rather than confrontation, resulting in activities such as discussions that require active involvement, appearing somewhat passive and orderly. Students can also tend to restrict their use of vocabulary and grammatical forms to avoid making mistakes, thereby reducing the risk of losing face, an equally powerful deterrent. This inhibition can often stand in the way of progressing in speaking a foreign language. Feeling uncomfortable in unstructured situations can also prevent learners from seizing opportunities to practice and learn (Rubin and Thompson, 1982), another important element of language learning. Unfortunately, such risks are inherently unavoidable as it is recognized that language learning involves some risk to the speaker, who must therefore extend the available resource (Bialystok, 1990). Another significant factor is the inherent nature of the student-teacher relationship in Japan. The teacher is the person who 'bestows knowledge' while the students are passive, letting 'the teacher's wisdom 'pour into' him' (Brown, 1994). This type of formal environment means that because of this status students have a reluctance to engage, interact, and fully question the teacher. If students continue to perceive the teacher as a distant authority they are unlikely to approach, thereby limiting their contact and interaction. It therefore seems preferable for students to be able to approach teachers if they need help to overcome any linguistic difficulties. The significance of these factors is illustrated in the following common complaint among native EFL teachers in Japan:

...[students] seldom volunteer answers, a trait that many Western instructors find extremely frustrating.

Most Japanese will only talk if specifically called upon, and then only if there is a clear-cut answer. This does not necessarily signify an unwillingness to comply, but may simply indicate that the student is too nervous to respond, or too uncertain of the answer to risk public embarrassment. (Anderson in Wadden, 1993)

Another common complaint among teachers is that to overcome these barriers the teacher will allocate small groups that reduce the risk to students and offer a supportive atmosphere in which to develop communicative competence. Yet despite this preparation minimal interaction may only be evident. According to Yamada (1997) this is because Japanese follow a 'Listener Talk' approach to conversation, which tends to value reticence and orderly turn taking, with less inclination to dominate the conversation. This may explain students' reluctance to utilize speaking strategies such as checking for understanding and seeking clarification if they are unsure. With this style of interaction the onus is on the listener to understand what is being said, rather than ask for clarification. This contrasts with the type of interaction which most Western teachers expect, which is students engaged in continual interaction in what we perceive to be a 'normal' exchange. This 'Speaker Talk' approach includes all the strategies which we teach students to assist them with their negotiation of language learning, and is therefore more applicable to a Western style of communication.

These learning styles further illustrate that Japanese students do not learn the same way, and therefore must be gradually taught 'ways' to learn (Jones, 1995). Otherwise, Western cultural traditions render expectations of student input and independence unrealistic, as they fail to acknowledge Japan's pedagogical traditions. If students have the freedom to choose a style of learning they will do so based on their expectations, this will defeat the object of a teaching approach whose intention is for students to play an active and

participatory role in the learning process. It is therefore important that teachers raise 'awareness about the pedagogical approaches of the course' (Bygate, 1994) and explain the rationale underlying the selection of tasks, as the notion of learner training demands that students be taught *how* to learn language as well as being taught the language itself (Oxford, 1990).

Nevertheless, it is recognized that teaching students how to participate is not a simple transmission of knowledge, but a collaboration as they attempt to express their own meanings for their own learning purposes (Dam, 1995). While at the same time, it is important teachers are also sensitive to specific Japanese cultural traditions, both inside and outside the classroom (Little and Dam, 1998).

Learning to learn

To reduce the influence of shyness, Japanese students could benefit greatly if a substantial portion of the lesson were given to teaching them ways of leaning for themselves. This could include strategies, activities and techniques students need to use to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing and using English (Oxford, 1990). This concept of student autonomy is a broad field which incorporates numerous definitions including, 'autonomy' (Rubin and Thompson, 1982); 'independence' (Nunan,1988); and 'responsibility' (Wenden,1991). Research has led to some general agreement on the key factors of what characteristics a 'good' learner should possess. They include that the learner:

1. Is actively involved in the language learning process
2. Attempts to decipher how the language works
3. Adapts even in situations they don't like
4. Knows that language is used to communicate
5. Adopts strategies to assist with their language learning

(Rubin, 1989; Rubin and Thompson, 1982; Saville-Troike, 1982).

These and other learning strategies are the mental steps that students use to learn a new language. Successful students are those who can adopt active strategies for themselves, rather than a reliance on the teacher (Wenden, 1991). This 'psychological proportion' (Allwright, 1981) is part of helping students take responsibility for their learning. In other words, if students made more effort to decipher what is involved in learning a language, and attempted to overcome any shortfalls, this would have a beneficial influence on their linguistic ability. It therefore seems appropriate to promote the qualities which constitute a 'good' student, as:

> ...one reason for the widespread acceptance and growth of autonomous...activities, it tends to be regarded as promoting autonomy, which we all know to be a highly valued goal. (Jones, 1995)

The rationale behind the research into the characteristics of successful language students is pedagogical in that it assumes that these strategies can be identified and taught to weaker students (Cribb, 2000). Svanes (1988) points out that in combination with motivation these are the best predicators of language success. Developing these skills grows out of student acceptance of responsibility for their own learning (Holec, 1981). The student must take at least some of the initiatives that give shape and direction to the learning process, and must share in the monitoring progress to evaluate the extent to which learning targets are achieved (Little and Dam, 1998). This will give students strategic knowledge and meta-cognitive learning strategies so that features made available through teacher correction, conscious raising and, in particular, instances of negotiation of form, become optimally salient (Cribb, 2000). This will allow for detection and rehearsal when student attention is stretched to maximum. This wide range of strategies will also enable students to improve their 'learning' abilities (Bialystok,1990) and help overcome any reticence (i. e. what EFL teachers perceive as shyness) that students

show due to a lack of familiarity with the teaching approach. They can lead to effective communication and include strategic competence (Canale, 1983) to compensate for pragmatic failure because of certain linguistic limitations. The strategies include:

1. Clarification strategies
2. Monitors progress
3. Memorization
4. Guessing/deductive inference
5. Deductive reasoning
6. Practice
(Rubin, 1981 ; Willis, 1996)

However, the 'foreign' aspect of these autonomous strategies means most Japanese students have had little experience because of the teaching methods which, as mentioned earlier, view the teachers as the 'respected bearers of knowledge' (Stapleton, 1995). Therefore, this way of learning must also be explicitly taught, a process of attitude change intended to teach learners to recognise the 'right' attitude (Wenden, 1991).

Due to these opposing teaching approaches, the culturally insensitive approach would be to expect students from Japan to be able to adopt these 'foreign' strategies immediately. Why would Japanese students, who have experienced years of passive learning, suddenly realise that they have to take more responsibility in the classroom? This lack of awareness of alternative learning techniques limits a student's ability in situations requiring the use of these learning strategies, thus appearing shy.

Once a range of possible strategies has been obtained, the teacher will be able to provide an environment to enable students to identify those strategies that work best for them. An effective style could include creating a more structured but somewhat informal classroom atmosphere to ease students out of their formality (Burden, 2002). Burden (ibid.) further points out the importance of presenting activities which tap into, not rely on, student's learning style. The aim is to make students realize the importance of skills that

include taking charge, organizing, practicing, memorizing, guessing, and accepting uncertainty (Rubin and Wenden, 1987). By not stressing strategies, teachers in essence discourage students from developing and exploring new skills, and in so doing, limiting their awareness of their cognitive capabilities (Wenden, 1991).

Offering learners the reward of mastering skills that will equip them to proceed is a basic requirement for teachers. If the students can adopt some of these skills they may help overcome, or at least minimize, any cultural barriers that arise.

Overcoming 'shyness'

In addition to learning strategies, there is a general acceptance in the literature (Rubin, 1981 ; Willis, 1996) that there are certain personality traits which also have a beneficial influence on the learning process. These skills are :

> behavior or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, and include any set of operations used by the learner to learn and to regulate their learning. (Rubin, 1981)

Students, especially those from 'collectivist societies' (Hofstede, 1986) need to build self-confidence in their capability to work independently of the teacher (Sinclair and Ellis, 1985).

Certain activities are useful for developing pragmatic awareness and opportunities for communicative practice, especially role-playing, which also helps promote the process of cross-cultural dialogue. As second language learning is a highly interactive process, the quality of the interaction is thought to have a considerable influence on the learning process (Richard and Lockheart, 1994), with research showing the conscious use of such strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency (Oxford, 1990 ; Rubin and Thompson, 1982). This can help turn the learning experience into one of increased cultural and self-awareness by encouraging greater cooperation and teamwork.

In teaching an 'alien' language non-Japanese teachers need to be sensitive to the fragility of using techniques that promote cultural understanding.

Therefore, we should not expect learners to deny the frustration they feel. The reason that these methods play a more significant role in Japan is because the teacher's role is more of a factor in helping student's progress through their development stages of language learning (Brown, 1994). Becoming partners, however, imposes its own responsibilities, ones which have again not traditionally been accorded to the recipients of teaching. It is recognized, that this adaptation must be explained and students will need to be sensitized (Cooker, 2004) to both the attitudinal and behavioral expectations required, as they move from a teacher-centered system to a communicative one where they assume more responsibility. Important among these responsibilities is that of consciousness about ones own learning process and strategies. To force one technique onto students as a means of becoming a 'better learner' will only lead to problems when it is surely realised that 'one fit does not suit all' (Jones, 1995).

This focus on the learner changes quite radically the typical distribution of power and authority in the classroom. How learners go about making sense of language data therefore becomes of central importance, and it is these psychological traits (attitude, personality) that appear to be related to successful language learning (Rubin and Thompson, 1982).

Conclusion

While it is acknowledged that there are many significant factors which affect the relationship in the classroom, if teachers are aware of them they can adopt strategies which may reduce their effect. These factors are much more difficult to quantify than by directly asking the students, so the onus of responsibility must be on the teacher to recognize and to be aware of factors affecting the success of the class. Once the teacher is aware and understands the reasons, then they will be able to adjust their methodology to overcome perceived barriers. Otherwise the strength of these cultural dimensions can often determine the level of participation among students, and even render opportunities to communicate and express feelings unproductive (Willis, 1996). Consequently, rather than be a motivation to use the language, activities can result in the prominent use of L1, correctly labeled as 'the most prominent difficulty students experience during communicative lessons' (Eldridge, 1996). This indicates that although the rationale for communicative tasks is to allow students to engage in meaningful communication, the use of L1 is in conflict with these goals.

This is evident even for activities which students could easily perform in L2, when the context is personalized and relevant, yet still results in minimal L2 interaction. Teachers should also be sensitive and perceptive to the unique situation, and not expect learners to deny the anger and frustration they may feel. These are real feelings and they need to be openly expressed. To smother these feelings may delay and actually prevent progress. It is therefore important to recognize the influence of shyness rather than dismiss it as a problem. This 'mental handicap' (Doyon, 2000) may cause students to feel uncomfortable in unstructured situations, resulting in taking a longer time to process what is expected, or a reluctance to fully participate in the lesson (e. g. answer questions, volunteer information etc.); or a general restrictin and limiting of their answers due to uncertainty. Also worries about accuracy may make students feel reluctant to take a risk or venture an opinion. These traits are often observed especially in the Japanese language class that I join every week. I would observe that many of the foreigners appear shy when asked to answer to the whole class in a language they do not have full command of. I have not considered these people 'handicapped' merely unaccustomed to the situation and lacking the linguistic

ability to express themselves freely.

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