We Think We Have to Speak English Perfectly

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In this paper the author describes the results of a pilot study to test the appropriateness of an interview protocol. The pilot study is part of wider research that investigates how the concept of self-efficacy from social cognitive theory can be used to understand the reasons for Japanese university students' low speaking fluency. The author discusses how semistructured interviews were used to examine how students' learning experiences at junior and senior high school contributed to their current self-efficacy levels. Four major commonalities in responses emerged from the data. These were foreign speaker effect, lack of feedback, negative reactions, and passive learning. Finally, the author suggests how each of these issues could be addressed through classroom practice and reflects on how an interviewer's style of questioning impacts on the quality of responses.

この論文は、インタビュー・プロトコルの妥当性を確認するための予備調査の結果を紹介しています。この予備調査は、どのように社会認知理論における自己効力感の概念が、日本の大学生が英語を流暢に話せない理由を理解するために用いられるかを調査する幅広い研究の一部です。本論文では、中学校と高等学校での学習経験が、現在の自己効力感のレベルにどのように貢献したかを調査するために、半構造化面接法をどのように使用したかについて説明します。データから 4 つの大きな共通点が明らかになりました。これらは、外国人の話し手の効果、フィードバックの欠如、否定的な反応、受動的な学習であった。本論文は、これらの問題それぞれが、教室の指導に与える影響を考察しています。

In this paper, I report the findings of a pilot study into the sources of Japanese university students' self-efficacy to speak English as a foreign language (hereafter speak EFL). The pilot study was conducted as part of an ongoing mixed methods study to design a new inventory of Japanese university students' speaking EFL self-efficacy.

Raising the speaking fluency of students is a key concern of educators in Japan (Amaki, 2008) because competency to communicate in English as a foreign language serves as a gateway to global employment and academic opportunities (Baker, 2016; Breaden, 2014). However, improving fluency levels is challenging because not only do Japanese students tend to have low speaking proficiency (Hamada, 2008; Rogers, 2007), but also according to some measures their proficiency is falling behind that of their Asian neighbors (Education First, 2018). Research has posited that Japanese university students' low proficiency at speaking EFL stems from low motivation and a lack of willingness to communicate (Munezane, 2015; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004); other studies indicate that students lose motivation and confidence due to teaching pedagogies at junior and senior high schools (Kikuchi, 2009). Therefore, understanding the factors that cause Japanese students to lose confidence in speaking English has significant consequences for raising their speaking proficiency levels.

I teach general English to 1st year students at a rural, civic university in Japan; the students are enrolled in economics courses. Enabling my students to reach their full potential as speakers of English is a primary goal of my teaching. However, through informal discussions with students and through reading student class reflections, I realized that although students wanted to become fluent speakers of English, they did not feel confident in their ability to achieve this goal. This led me to suspect that a leading cause of students' low proficiency was low self-efficacy. Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy refers to the degree of

confidence that an individual has about the likelihood of them completing a specific task, and it has been found to be a powerful indicator of success across domains (Zimmerman, 1995).

Literature Review

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy developed from Bandura's social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory holds that people have the power to influence their own action through the interplay of behavioral, environmental, and personal determinants (Bandura, 2012). A person's belief that they can successfully execute a behavior is controlled by their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy itself is determined by four sources: mastery, social modelling, social persuasion, and physical and emotional states (Bandura, 2012). Mastery experiences are those of successfully completing the task in the past, social modelling experiences are observing similar others successfully completing the task, social persuasion experiences are the verbal and nonverbal feedback from others about task performance, and finally physical and emotional states refers to how people interpret their emotional feelings and physical reactions associated with the task.

Rather than being a general personality trait, self-efficacy is domain specific so that a person may have high self-efficacy in one area, yet low self-efficacy in another (Zimmerman, 1995). Self-efficacy is believed to influence academic achievement in a mediating role by encouraging students to try more difficult tasks and have fewer negative reactions to the task (Zimmerman, 2000). We can anticipate then that students with low self-efficacy to speak English are likely to refrain from engaging in communication and to feel anxiety when pressed to do so. Self-efficacy levels are formed by the accumulation of learning experiences; this means that not only do past experiences form present self-efficacy levels but also that they can be developed by transforming current teaching practice.

Although there have been studies that explore sources of self-efficacy in mathematics (Lent, Lopez, & Bieschke, 1991; Usher & Pajares, 2009) and of student teachers (Phan & Locke, 2015; Poulou, 2007), there are few studies that deal with sources of EFL self-efficacy.

Self-Efficacy in Foreign Language Learning

Self-efficacy in language learning has thus far been studied as an aspect of motivation (Dörnyei, 1999; Kormos, Kiddle, & Csizér, 2011) with studies pointing to self-efficacy as a powerful indicator of foreign language learning success (Burrows, 2016; Templin, Guile, & Okuma, 2001). Nevertheless, research so far has concentrated on how self-efficacy correlates with other motivational factors rather than concentrating on generating actionable results for classroom practice. Additionally, the area of self-efficacy in foreign language is still relatively new and existing studies have concentrated on reading, writing, or listening skills rather than on speaking.

Speaking EFL Self-Efficacy in Japan

Studies that focus on the Japanese context have tended to center on reading and listening self-efficacy. Studies that address speaking confidence of Japanese learners have done so from other perspectives such as self-perceived communicative competence (Lockley, 2013), language learning beliefs (Toyama, 2015), or foreign language anxiety (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). Also, to my knowledge at the time of writing, there is no empirically tested inventory to determine speaking self-efficacy levels of Japanese students. I hope that the development of a specific inventory will help teachers design learning programs that are attentive to students' self-efficacy levels, improve both the self-efficacy levels and the learning outcomes of their students, and also enable further research in this area.

Method

In this paper, I report the results of a pilot study that was conducted as part of a larger mixed methods project to design an inventory of Japanese university students' speaking EFL self-efficacy levels. In the design, semistructured interviews will be used to explore students' experiences of learning to speak English at junior and senior high school. This information will determine themes to include in the inventory. Finally, the inventory will be administered to a sample of Japanese university students and then be tested quantitatively for validity and reliability. The pilot study was conducted to test the effectiveness of the interview protocol for the semistructured interviews and to establish tentative

themes to guide the main study. The interview protocol is added as an appendix to this paper.

Pilot Study Research Design

The purpose of the pilot study was to determine the reliability and usefulness of the interview protocol, to establish tentative themes to inform the analysis of the main study's qualitative stage, and also to give me practice at conducting qualitative interviews. In the pilot study, students were invited for an interview after completing a selection questionnaire of EFL speaking self-efficacy scales and demographic questions. This questionnaire was adapted from that of Mills' (2004) French foreign language self-efficacy scale. I choose this because it has been found to be reliable and been widely used in subsequent research. From the questionnaire results, I invited eight students to participate in the interview. I constructed the interview protocol to draw out students' learning experiences at junior and senior high school in relation to Bandura's four sources and also to self-regulated learning, which has been forwarded as a fifth source by Usher (2009). The completed protocol was reviewed by a professional educator and then translated into Japanese by the author. The translated protocol was then sent to two native speakers for comments with amendments made where appropriate.

Procedure

The site of the pilot study was a rural, civic university in Japan. I administered the selection questionnaire to 104 first-year economics majors enrolled in general English classes. An explanation of the study and informed consent were distributed with the questionnaire. I requested students to include their student number at the top of the questionnaire if they were willing to be interviewed. I then ranked the responses by totaling the self-efficacy scores and divided the responses into low and high self-efficacy groups. I asked two males and two females from each group to be interviewed yielding eight participants. However, one male student later dropped out of the study this meant the final number of interviewees was seven, four female and three male. The demographic data of the participants is included in Table 1. The interviews were held in an office at the university with just the student and myself present and took an average of 30 to 40 minutes to complete. The interview was conducted in Japanese and audio recorded with two voice recorders and then was translated and transcribed by the author. The data was anonymized by removing student numbers from the questionnaires after the analysis was completed and by students choosing an alias to use in the study.

Main Findings

Deep reading of the interviews was performed to determine common themes. However, since the sample was relatively small, it is unlikely that saturation was achieved with the number of interviews. Consequently, the following main findings from the pilot interviews should be regarded as commonalities between responses rather than actual themes. The four main topics that repeated frequently across interviews were *foreign speaker effect* when students indicated that they needed to converse with foreign people to improve English speaking skill, *lack of feedback* when students said that they had no recollection of receiving feedback on speaking performance from peers or teachers, *passive learning* when students recalled speaking practice as being restricted to reading aloud from the

Table 1: Demographic Data of Interview Participants

Alias	Age	Gender	Self-Efficacy	TOEIC
Karen	18	Female	Low	245
Lisa	18	Female	Low	325
Mika	18	Female	High	450
Saori	18	Female	High	390
Riku	18	Male	Low	445
Hiro	18	Male	Low	230
Joe	18	Male	High	245

textbook or reciting speeches, and finally *negative reactions* when students reported feeling bored or embarrassed by speaking practice.

Foreign Speaker Effect

Students felt that speaking with foreign people was an essential factor in becoming good English speakers. A lack of social modelling through observation of similar others such as teachers and peers using English communicatively in class may have reinforced the impression that they need to speak to a foreign person to learn to speak English well. There is also the sense that lessons with a foreign teacher involve more active tasks; Joe said, "We had a teacher from America we did easy games together. It was fun." Conversely, students had a negative impression of their Japanese teachers' English abilities, for example, Riku complained that "the Japanese teacher's pronunciation was not good."

Lack of Feedback

Japan is a collectivist society and as such receiving support and confirmation from ingroup members such as teachers and peers is essential for the development of confidence and self-efficacy (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It is concerning that students said they never received any feedback or support about their English speaking ability. For example, Saori's response that "I've never been told anything" was typical. Of course, just because students do not recall receiving positive feedback, it does not mean that teachers never gave it, but rather that it was insufficient to leave a lasting impression. This idea was reinforced by Mika who commented that students "need more individual feedback, to hear what we can and can't do well."

Passive Learning

Students reported that speaking practice at junior and senior high school was limited to either reading the textbook aloud or performing memorized speeches. Karen said that she had no memory of communicating in English at school at all, commenting, "Conversation? I don't think I did any conversation at all in lessons." This issue is worrying because it appears that for some of the students, experiences of learning to speak English were restricted to forming the sounds and intonations necessary for good pronunciation.

Negative Reactions

As students reported that their speaking experiences were restricted to reading the textbook aloud and performing memorized speeches, it is not surprising that they reported negative feelings such as boredom and embarrassment about speaking activities.

A tendency to strive for perfection may also have negatively affected students' reactions to speaking English. As Riku explained, "We think we have to speak English perfectly or fluently, if we speak clumsily we are embarrassed. If we can't show our true ability, we are embarrassed." Students consistently said that they did not like desk-based study and wanted more opportunities to talk with friends about everyday topics.

Reflections

In this section, I will first suggest how each of the above issues could be addressed through classroom practice and then reflect on the impact my interviewing style had on the quality of responses.

Implications for Classroom Practice

The main findings from the interview prompted me to consider their impact for classroom practice in Japan. In the following, I introduce some ideas for how teachers may address foreign speaker effect, lack of feedback, passive learning, and negative reactions.

Foreign speaker effect. Students' belief that they need to talk with a foreign speaker to improve their English speaking proficiency could stem from lack of social modelling by Japanese speakers of English. Therefore, students' social modelling experiences could be increased by Japanese teachers using English for everyday communicative tasks in class, and by teachers, irrespective of their first language, using materials that feature Japanese nationals using English effectively.

Lack of feedback. Students said that they did not recall receiving feedback about their speaking ability. Feedback is most effective when it is genuine, relates to a specific element, and also offers steps for further improvement (Krenn, Würth, & Hergovich, 2013). Therefore, a generic "good job" or "well done" is unlikely to affect students' self -efficacy. I suggest that teachers

ensure that feedback is individualized and focuses on what students can do to improve.

Passive learning. Students reported a focus on passive learning, such as recitation and pronunciation exercises. These skills are of course essential, but they need to be taught as part of a range of communicative skills and conversation practice so that students can gain an assortment of mastery experiences of communicating in English and thereby improve their self-efficacy.

Negative reactions. Feelings and reactions towards a task influence how we perceive our ability towards that task because we tend to attribute these reactions to our own ability rather than to the quality of the activity. Negative feelings of anxiety or boredom lead to feelings of incompetency, whereas feelings of interest and engagement lead to feelings of capability (Usher & Pajares, 2009) . Negative feelings could be ameliorated by having students practice conversations with friends rather than in front of the whole class. Moreover, interest could be increased by providing students with a variety of discussion topics, using a range of activities, and alternating between group, pair, and individual tasks.

Interview Style

In light of the pilot test, I was able to both improve the interview protocol and to become more aware of my interviewing style. Concerning the protocol, although the questions themselves stayed the same, I changed my manner of asking the questions. The phrasing of qualitative questions often employs phrases such as "Tell me about a time when you …" or "How did you feel when...." (Merriam, 2014). I found that this style of questioning did not yield lengthy responses from the students with many responses limited to "No, nothing." or "I don't remember that." This made me conjecture that these kinds of questions might have been threatening to them. Therefore, after the first two interviews, I decided to change the structure to twostep questions where first I asked an easy question such as "Have you ever….?" and once I had elicited an answer, I followed up with more probing questions such as "Can you tell me more about that …" or "What did you think about that?" I found that when I gradually led them into the topic, I could get richer responses from them.

Also, I found through the course of the pilot interviews that I began to identify some key phrases that indicated students might have more to say. One was *da kedo* (however or but), and the other was *ma* (well); both indicated that students probably had a different opinion to what they were actually telling me. In the later interviews, I learned to push the students to explain more often by prompting through repeating the phrase back to them "*da kedo*?" Finally, on a practical note, I realized that it is best for the interviewer to say as little as possible; it soon became tiring having to transcribe all the little encouraging comments I had made in the interview such as "really", "wow", and "oh." Again, in later interviews, I learned to keep encouraging responses to smiles and nods, which were just as effective in getting students to elaborate and less bothersome when it came to transcription.

Limitations

As this was a pilot study, the motivation was to test the suitability of the interview protocol rather than to produce definitive conclusions. Therefore, there are significant limitations to the study. The results should be treated with caution and cannot be expected to adhere to covenants of reliability and replicability. They are presented here to encourage dialogue and discussion in the exciting area of educational psychology and in the hope that they may be of immediate use to educational practitioners.

Conclusion

The pilot study yielded some noteworthy results that suggest that the participants of the study had not experienced sufficient positive experiences at junior and senior high school to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy to speak EFL. Particularly, students' mastery experiences were limited to recitations and reading aloud with little exposure to less structured communicative tasks. Students also had not experienced positive feedback and evaluations from teachers and peers. Neither had they developed an image of Japanese people as English speakers, which had led to a preoccupation with the need to converse with foreign people to improve speaking proficiency.

Finally, students had developed negative feelings towards speaking English through an overreliance on whole class activities such as reading aloud and speech giving. I hope that these results can be further expanded and validated in the main study.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Date _____

Interviewer _____

Interviewee nickname _____

Age _____

Academic Year _____

File code _____

Theme 1: General Background

1) Tell me about yourself.
   a) *What do you like to do in your free time?*
2) Tell me about yourself as a student.
   a) *What do you think is your favorite subject?*
   b) *What is your least favorite subject?*
3) I'd like to ask about your history of speaking English.
   a) *Have you studied English outside of school? Where? For how long?*
   b) *Have you ever travelled to English speaking country?*

Theme 2: Opinion Towards Learning English

4) I'd like to ask you about your opinion towards learning English.
   a) *What do you think of the English course at this university?*
   b) *Could you describe the kind of activities you would like to do in an ideal English course to me?*
5) Tell me about your goals for learning to speak English.
   a) *What do you want to learn English speaking for?*
   b) *How do you imagine yourself using English after you graduate university?*
   c) *What areas do you especially want to work on?*
   d) *How important is learning to speak English to you?*

Theme 3: Learning English Experiences (Mastery + Self-regulatory)

6) Tell me about the kind of English speaking activities you did at senior high school.
   a) *Which ones did you particularly enjoy? Why?*
   b) *How would you rate your ability as an English speaker from 1-10?*
   c) *Did you perform tasks in front of: the whole class, a few classmates, just the teacher*?
7) Tell me about a memorable occasion of speaking English at school.
   a) *How well did you do?*

b) *Why do you think you could /could not do well?*

8) Tell me about the kind of practice you did to help you speak English.

a) *What experiences do you have of speaking English outside of class?*

b) *What kind of homework did you do for English speaking practice?*

c) *Did you do any other activities to help you speak English?*

Theme 4: Support Received from Teachers, Parents and Classmates at Senior High School (Social Persuasion)

9) Tell me about someone who helped you to learn English speaking.

a) *What kind of things did they do to help you?*

10) Tell me about what others have told you about your English speaking ability.

a) *What kind of feedback did you receive from teachers?*

i) *What kind of feedback did you receive from parents?*

ii) *What about your friends?*

b) *How did your teachers make you feel about your English speaking ability?*

c) *What other things do you think teachers could have done to make you feel more confident and motivated about speaking English?*

Theme 5: Emotional Reactions to Speaking English at Senior High School (Physiological States)

11) I'd like you remember the speaking activities you did in high school, in general how did they make you feel?

a) *How did you physically feel? Alert, energetic, tired, etc.*

b) *How did you mentally feel? Anxious, engaged, bored, etc.*

c) *What factors do you think made you feel so?*

Theme 6: Influence of Others on English Speaking Ability (Vicarious Experiences)

12) Tell me about how you prepared for speaking tasks in class.

a) *Did you listen to CDs, videos, teacher's reading, another students' reading?*

b) *Who or what did you find most useful to listen to?*

13) Tell me about someone you think speaks English well.

a) *Where are they from?*

b) *What's your relationship to them?*

c) *How about your teacher or classmates?*

14) Is there anything else you think I should know about your experiences of learning to speak English at senior high school?

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions.