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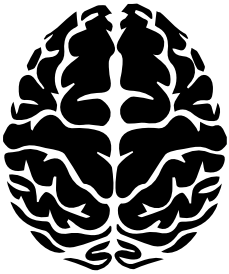

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What Are You Talking About? – Japanese EFL Learners Lacking Background Knowledge

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Abstract: Japanese EFL learners are sometimes characterized as reticent, uncritical, and reluctant to express opinions. While culture influences behavior, sourcing such behavior to purely cultural reasons indicates that learners are purely products of their culture and propagates the myth of the native speaker as being somehow superior to their non-native speaker counterparts. This paper presents an alternative explanation for Japanese English learners' reticence to articulate their opinions to native and near native speakers of English. It presents findings from interviews with nine Japanese participants who reported on their interactions with their non-Japanese English-speaking friends. Based on the sociolinguistic behavior displayed by the Japanese learners of English, this paper also presents a rationale for the need to assist them in developing critical thinking skills as such skill development will help them not only learn English, but will also provide them with tools that will enable them to more successfully negotiate contact situations.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Learner Development, Culture

Introduction

Implementing and developing critical thinking skills in English language education as advocated by Dunn (2015), and Kubota (1998, 1999), requires a concrete rationale for their inclusion, along with an understanding of what such skills could offer EFL learners, not only academically, but also personally, while at the same time taking into consideration the critiques of researchers such as Atkinson (1997). "Critical thinking skills are procedures that allow deeper understanding of information as well as the more complete use of the information presented or gained through critical thinking skills" (Dunn, 2015, pp. 31-32). Inevitably, learners potentially will find themselves in contact situations with more proficient or native speakers of English. Advocating that learners do not possess the cultural or educational background, or that teaching critical thinking is akin to burdening learners with cultural baggage, does a disservice to them. These skills not only help learners to gain a deeper understanding of information they read or hear, but also serves to assist them in gaining a deeper understanding and perspective of the beliefs, values, and ideologies of their interlocutors. This research examines two sociolinguistic problems Japanese learners reported experiencing during interactions with non-Japanese speakers of English (NJES) and argues that there is need to develop critical thinking skills to address perceived negative stereotypes and the perception of 'native' speakers as authorities on topics of discussion.

Literature Review

Japanese EFL learners sometimes encounter a problem when they have conversations with foreigners. Simply, they often notice that conversation topics are selected by the more fluent speaker, at times, with no regard for their lack of background knowledge (Devitte, 2016b). While not always viewed as a problem, as a result, Japanese learners say that they sometimes feel that this problem contributes to their being unable to adequately and fully contribute and participate in conversations. This phenomenon raises interesting pedagogical issues for teachers, especially regarding how they might use critical thinking skills-such as analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing to either teach learners how to facilitate their conversations, acquire necessary information to maintain the conversations, or to critically evaluate the information being presented to them.

There is debate regarding the teaching of critical thinking and the implications that Japanese communication styles are incongruent with so-called 'western" academic skills such as critical thinking and HOTS/LOTS is characterized by the "cultural" explanations given for Japanese learners' hesitance to articulate their opinions. From Fox (1994) characterizing Japanese learners as favoring indirectness, vagueness, politeness, and lacking critical thinking to other researchers characterizing Japanese communication styles as less verbal, indirect or lacking politeness strategies in interactions involving invitations (Cutrone, 2010; Ellis, 1991), the reasons for Japanese hesitant behaviour have

been attributed to manifestations of their culture.

While it is important to not impose cultural values on learners and respect their individual communication preferences (Atkinson, 1997; Cutrone, 2010), characterizing Japanese learners' communication behaviours in comparison to native speakers of English only serves to maintain the hegemonic position of English in Japan as it reinforces the perceived superiority of the 'native speaker' (Holliday, 2006). The sociolinguistic behaviours of learners are complex and should not simply be reduced to a cultural explanation. Critical thinking does not to impose values on a group of people, but rather helps them understand and interact with members of other cultures and communities. Teaching critical thinking can help to remove the dichotomy between eastern and western cultures, eliminate exoticized images of culture, and invalidate the attitude that learners are only a product of their cultures (Kubota, 1998). In other words, it "de-westernizes" the concept of critical thinking by exploring the idea that people of all cultures do critical thinking in their native languages in different forms Teaching critical thinking can serve to enhance their experiences in contact situations while allowing them to negotiate their own cultural values and identity in relation to those of their interlocutors, thereby improving their critical cultural awareness and assist them to become 'intercultural speakers' (Byram, 1997, 2008).

Assessing Communication Styles

That learners are mere products of their culture seems to be prevalent in the literature. Some researchers have pointed out that the goal of teaching is not to impose cultural values or to force learners to be more outspoken, which Cutrone (2010) and Atkinson (1997) advocate against. However, research that characterizes Japanese communication styles describes Japanese as:

1. less verbal, more inclined to use silence in intercultural interactions.
2. inclined to use more back-channelling devices.
3. more direct in some situations, in particular those where a lower-status person is being addressed, and less direct in others.
4. lacking the politeness strategies needed to successfully perform face-threatening speech acts such as invitations and requests.
5. less explicit in giving reasons for their verbal behavior.
6. more formal.
7. recognizing status relationships between speakers rather than to level of familiarity. (Ellis 1991, p. 116)

These descriptors should be viewed with scepticism as they are generalizations of complex behaviours that vary depending on interlocutors, their familiarity with their conversation partners, their feelings of closeness, and their individual communication

preferences as expectations and behaviors in contact situations are not as clear cut as the above research might suggest.

This paper examines a sociolinguistic phenomenon experienced by some Japanese EFL learners that have established friendships with non-Japanese English speakers in Japan, elaborating on the problem of their having a lack of background knowledge and discusses how this might contribute to the generalized view of Japanese learners as being uncritical and reticent to give their opinions.

Methodology

The participants for this research were nine Japanese volunteers who contacted the researcher during the data collection period of his Master's thesis. Permission to use the data collected from the participants for further research was acquired at the time of the interviews. The participants were Japanese nationals ranging in age between 19-40, who have established friendships with non-Japanese native English speakers of English (NJES). Each interview was conducted in English, during which the participants' English level was assessed using Cambridge FCE and CAE rubrics for speaking to categorize their level from low-intermediate to advanced.

The exploratory nature of this qualitative research project focused on obtaining information on the behavior of participants towards the language used in their interactions. They were interviewed through single episode interaction

interviews within a week after a single interaction with one or more of their friends. The NJES interlocutors were not interviewed as this research focused on the problems which Japanese participants noted during their interactions. The participants' demographic and interaction information are provided in tables 1.1 and 1.2.

Table 1. Japanese Participants: Demographic Background

	Gender	Nationality	Age	Occupation	English L2 Experience	English proficiency
JF1	F	Japanese	Late 20's	Office worker	9 years in Japan + 1-month study abroad: England	Low-Intermediate
JF2	F	Japanese	Mid 20's	Graduate Student	11 years in Japan + 1-year study abroad: New Zealand	Advanced
JF3	F	Japanese	Early 40's	Teacher	12+ years	Advanced
JF4	F	Japanese	Early 20's	University Student (1st year)	8 years in Japan + travel	Intermediate
JM5	M	Japanese	Mid 20's	Office worker	10 years in Japan + 1 year working Australia	High-Intermediate
JF6	F	Japanese	Mid 20's	University Student (1st year)	7 years in Japan + travel	Intermediate
JF7	F	Japanese	Late 20's	Office worker	9 years in Japan	Low-Intermediate
JM8	M	Japanese	Mid 20's	Office worker	9 years + travel	High-Intermediate
JM9	M	Japanese	Early 20's	University Student (4th year)	9 years + 1-year study abroad: Ireland	High-Intermediate

Table 2. Japanese Participants: Interaction Type Details

	# of NJES Friends	NJES Friends' Nationalities and Number in Prior Interaction	Average Frequency of Contact	Interaction Type	Duration of Prior Interaction
JF1	5+	CA (1)	2-3 times a month	One-on-one	~ 2 hours
JF2	10+	US (1)/AUS (2) /CA (1)/UA (1)	3-4 times a month	Small group	~ 3 hours
JF3	5	UK (1(	Once a week	One-on-one	~ 30 minutes
JF4	15+	USA (3)	6-7 times a month	Small group	~ 2 hours
JM5	5+	USA (2)	Once a week	Small group	~ 4 hours
JF6	10+	USA (1)/UK (1)	5-7 times a month	Small group	~ 3 hours
JF7	2	AUS (1)	1-2 times a month	One-on-one	~ 1 hour
JM8	4+	AU (1)	2-4 times a month	One-on-one	~ 2 hours
JM9	15+	IRE (2)/USA (3)	About 7 times a month	Small group	~ 4 hours

AU: Austria, AUS: Australia, CA: Canada, UK: United Kingdom, IRE: Ireland, JPN: Japan, UA: Ukraine, USA: United States of America.

Each interview was composed of three main stages following the same pattern as outlined by Neustupný (2003). The participants were asked to reconstruct their schedule for the day, including the details prior to and after their interaction with their friend(s) by recalling from memory and reporting on the specific situations that they experienced. The second stage involved the participant being asked to describe the purpose, content, participants and any other relevant information for each situation. Finally, participants reported their entire awareness of each situation at the time of the interaction.

The participant data collected for this research was analyzed in situ (i.e., no attempts to correct their English was made) using the model of language management theory (LMT) as it describes behaviors which interlocutors exhibit during interactions as a process allowing for the extensive analysis of contact situations and the language used in such situations (Jernudd and Neustupný, 1978). Language management theory processualizes the behaviours of interlocutors; towards the language used, towards the interactions, and the problems which interlocutors note. Neustupný' (2005) defines problems as "commencements with deviations from norms" (p. 310) with deviations either being negatively evaluated (aka. problems) or positively evaluated. LMT further describes how participants adjust their own behaviours following a six-stage process;

1. Norms expectations (socially-shared or individual) of appropriate and expected behavior,
2. Deviation –behaviour (interlocutor or self) which deviates from a norm,
3. Noting – whether or not a deviation is noticed,
4. Evaluation –noted deviations are evaluated as positive / negative / neutral,
5. Adjustment design– the plan made by the participant to attempt to remove the problem,
6. Implementation – the act of implementing the adjustment plan to attempt to remove the deviation (Neustupný, 2005, pp. 310-311).

The deviations noted by the participants were categorised according to Neustupný's (1997) description of the 'Rules of Communication'. For this paper, two sociolinguistic behaviours relating to the Content Rules are relevant– what is communicated; themes, topics, and functions such as giving opinions. For this paper, these problems will be discussed as they pertain to the following research questions;

1. What problems do Japanese EFL learners feel they encounter when interacting with their NJES friends?

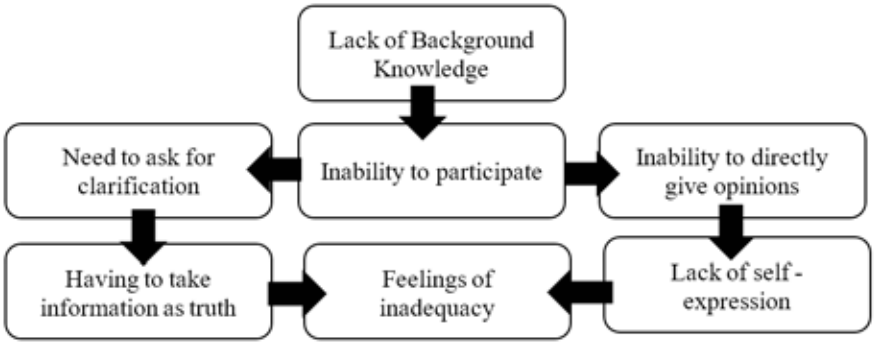
2. How do Japanese EFL learners make adjustments to their own behaviour to mitigate problems in their interactions with their NJES friends?

Results

Lack of Background Knowledge

Of the nine Japanese participants, eight noted that the topics that they found themselves discussing were often initiated by their non-Japanese participants, with only JF2 noting that she regularly initiated some conversation topics. While linguistic problems were noted, of specific interest was a sociolinguistic deviation categorized as "a lack of background knowledge" as it was discussed by all the participants. As outlined in figure 1.1, this problem often contributed to other problems also experienced by the participants, primarily; 1) they noted that they were not always able to be as direct in the way they delivered their opinions as their NJES friends, and 2) they needed to ask for clarification or for background information. These led to feelings of not being able to fully participate at times in the conversations and feelings of non-expressiveness, which also potentially resulted in feelings of inadequacy. This lead them to either having to accept whatever their NJES friend said as truth or they were unable to express their ideas or scepticism during their conversations.

Figure 1.1. Problems Noted Furing Interaction



The interactions the Japanese participants detailed were unguided, authentic interactions that they typically have with their NJES friends and they discussed a variety of different topics with their NJES friends. Some of the topics which they lacked background knowledge of were; JF1- life in Canada and the differences between Japan and Canada, JF2- marijuana legalization, Australian teachers strikes, JF4- American high school ceremonies and proms, JM5- approaches to romantic relationships and the differences between Americans and Japanese, JF6- politics in America, JF7- historical knowledge of and the differences between Japanese/Australian cultures, JM8- music from the 1970's and 80's and politics, JM9- politics and immigration issues.

As an example of the participants' lack of experience with topics discussed during interactions, JF2 exemplified,

> *"I was, 'What are they talking about?' I remember that there debate afterwards about legalizing marijuana. I remember thinking legalizing marijuana is a topic everyone [wants] to talk about. I have never thought about it. That's why when one of my friends or someone asked me if it was legal in Japan, I thought NO WAY.".*

This was attributed by JF2 as her not possessing enough, if any, cultural or historical information to fully understand what was being discussed.

Giving Opinons

All the Japanese participants also noted that the directness and strength of opinions of their NJES friends influence their behaviour in interactions. Most of the Japanese participants viewed the NJES directness of opinion as confidence in their knowledge of the topics discussed. However, JM8, as recalled from his interaction, offered a cultural explanation for the perceived difference between how Japanese and NJES give their opinions. He said, "They [NJES] always talk about their opinions. Japanese synchronize themselves with other people. So, one of the things I'm surprised by is that immigration should be acceptable in Japan, but the Austrian guy said that it's not good for the country, because they just eat our incomes. So, it is very direct, kind of oppressive for us to think about that policy. So, I think it's kind of direct communication. Opinion orientated communication is really kind of one of the characteristic for someone."

Not all the participants viewed direct opinions as being cultural, although they did express that Japanese are less likely to give direct opinions (JF4, JM5, JM9), whereas JF2, JF3 and JF6 suggested that they thought it was more of an individual preference. Interestingly, direct opinions were not always viewed negatively as indicated by JF4.

> *"When I hear a strong opinion. Firstly, I ask them to explain more. Then I explain my way of thinking. Sometimes we can't reach [agreement]. But, it is not a bad thing. The important thing is to accept each other. Have [an] open mind. I like talking about political issues and hear[ing] their [my NJES friends] opinions. When we share opinions, I feel very close."*

In fact, JF4, JM5, JM8, and JM9 all indicated that sharing opinions is an act that demonstrates openness and develops friendships. As JM5 said, "I don't agree always with my friends, but they know things I don't. They have different culture[s]. They have more experience. I learn from them." The Japanese participants all indicated that they appreciate the chance to learn about other peoples' opinions and worldviews as they see such interactions as opportunities to learn, either by researching or asking questions. They indicated that because their friends come from different cultures and countries, they have different experiences and

are willing to share those experiences and their opinions with their friends.

While the participants noted that opinions and lack of background information were at times problems, it is important to note that the participants did not view the topics negatively. The primary result of these problems was the potential for the participants to have negative feelings about their own abilities as JM8 stated, "We feel that we are kind of less knowledgeable than English speakers. They know a lot about things, because English is a great communicative tool to gather information around the world. So, I think that one of the obstacles is that frustration. If I was a native, I can know more information. That kind of thing is something I always get frustrated about." In other words, while they viewed interactions as opportunities for learning, the Japanese participants, at times, compared their own knowledge and ability to articulate that knowledge with that of their NJES friends, which potentially led participants to view them as authorities on the topics discussed.

Strategies to Adjust for Problem

The participants also reported on how they addressed problems, or made adjustments, as they encountered them. The first strategy reported was doing research during or after the interaction (JF2, JF3, JF4, JM5, JF6, JM8, and JM9). JM8 reported, "Later, I will read some magazines. Think about it and then, I want

to discuss it with [my NJES friends]. That's the kind of thing I do all of the time." While his active gathering of information after the fact serves to broaden his knowledge for future interactions, the other participants indicated that they search for information during interactions. This sentiment was expressed by JF2, JF4, JM5, JM6, and JM9. This includes their searching for new vocabulary as JM9 said, "If I don't know something [like facts]. I just Google it. Or [if I don't know a word], I look up the word in a dictionary."

The other strategy reported (JF1, JF2, JF4, JF6, and JF7) was relying on NJES friends for the necessary context and background information. As an example, during her conversation with a group of her NJES friends, JF2 noted,

> *"One of my friends talked about strike by teachers and I remember. But he was talking about striking teacher or you know teachers' protest against local government and I didn't have any background knowledge so I couldn't follow what [he]was talking about, but later [I asked my other Australian friend and she] explained to me how teachers' organization is strong in Australia."*

It is important that note that participants explained that asking for clarification or simply listening to others' opinions did not signal agreement. They reported that they needed time to process and contextualize information. On the other hand, the participants' receptivity to their NJES friend's opinions, in a

manner, suggests that they might view them as authorities on the unfamiliar topics. JF4 articulated this saying that when she found she was unable to fully give her opinion due to a lack of familiarity with the topic of American anti-Japanese views, she was only able to "accept" what her friend had said.

> *"The only thing I could do was accept it and [focus on] making a close friendship with my friend. I didn't give any details. I believe our bond is strong because sharing opinions is a very effective way to know each other. With her, I don't worry about giving my opinion."*

The primary problem that they reported was that they were not always able to articulate their own opinion in a manner that was satisfactory and simply having to accepting opinions and information as fact was troubling for them. While they could sometimes compensate for this by using their smartphones to check facts or by directly asking for clarification, they all indicated that they wanted to focus on more expressing their own ideas, thoughts, and opinions, rather than just being passive in the conversations.

Discussion

The lack of background knowledge as evidenced in this research presents a deeper behavioural explanation for Japanese learners' hesitance to articulate their opinions. Not possessing the necessary background information, along with their feeling of

having to accept NJES opinions as fact, in part, contributes to the continuing hegemonic position of English in Japan, and contributes to the perceived superiority of the 'native speaker' (Holliday, 2006). As Holliday has argued, higher proficiency English learners and 'native' speakers may be perceived as authorities on language or information by Japanese EFL learners. In other words, learners assume that fluency equals authority and that 'native-speakers' have perfect knowledge of their own cultures, history, current events and contemporary issues. This is potentially the reason for the perpetuation of non-native speakers (including Japanese EFL learners) and their cultures as "'collectivist', 'reticent', 'indirect', 'passive', 'docile', 'lacking in self-esteem' 'reluctant to challenge authority', 'easily dominated', 'undemocratic', or 'traditional' and, 'uncritical and unthinking'" (Holliday, 2006, p. 385) leading to a perpetuation of negative stereotypes. The lack of background information as noted by the participants, particularly in the area of current event issues, results in a seeming hesitance to give opinions and to feelings of being unable to fully participate.

When the participants noticed that they lacked background knowledge, they compensated by researching necessary information. In addition to researching background knowledge (Nekvapil & Sherman, 2009), learners also looked up phrases or words in dictionaries, consulted experts in the language such as a teacher, checked the Internet for videos about the topic, language, or places, or prepare a list of questions that could be asked later. The challenge for learners is synthesizing and critiquing the information they gather when researching a

topic. If they research in their L2, are they likely to focus more on the lexical information and less on the actual content and its validity? Additionally, if they research in their L1, will they receive the necessary cultural or historical context to understand the opinions of their interlocutors?

While it is practically impossible for teachers to cover every conceivable topic their learners might encounter, through helping them to develop critical thinking skills, learners can learn to negotiate unfamiliar topics and to articulate their own opinions in a way that allows them to represent themselves. The participants in this study reported that a lack of background information makes it difficult to participate in conversations and while they also reported that they researched necessary background information, it is difficult for them to determine the validity and authenticity of sources, especially in their L2. As such, developing critical thinking skills will help learners to question what 'native' speakers say and not always take them as an authority on topics as every NJES they encounter are likely to be neither an authority, nor familiar with the linguistic and sociolinguistic challenges they face.

Finally, as evidenced by the learners in this study who have established friendships with NJES, proscribed "cultural" tendencies may not be the best explanation for their behaviour. Through developing their intercultural communicative competence with their NJES friends, they are learning to be, as Byram (1997) termed, 'intercultural speakers'. Simply describing

Japanese learners as "reticent" or "shy" does them a disservice and does not necessarily reflect their behaviour in contact situations.

Conclusion

The small number of participants in this qualitative study limits the generalizability of the results, however, the data from the interviews strongly suggests that learners need to develop critical thinking skills in regards to both language and information, as it is plays a vital role in their intercultural communicative development (Kubota, 1998), especially as learners focus on meaning and socially contextualize conversations with NJES (Devitte, 2016a). The fact that several of the participants from this study mentioned that they make use of the Internet to check unfamiliar information or that they ask their NJES friends for clarification or explanation, leads to the reasonable assumption that there is a need for them to develop critical thinking skills to be able to determine fact from fiction and to assess and critically evaluate information.

Even with topics which Japanese learners may be familiar with, they need to learn not to compare themselves or hold themselves to the standard of 'native-speakers,' especially linguistically. This will assist them in reevaluating the myth of 'native-speaker' superiority (Holliday, 2006) and through this, as Kubota (1998) argues, develop a critical awareness of language and its role in culture and society. Furthermore, helping learners to negotiate their lack of background information, will encourage them to develop their intercultural communicative competence, thereby

allowing them to understand others' norms which is crucial for the development of social relationships (Devitte, 2016a).

Purely attributing learners' behaviors as an aspect of their culture does not provide adequate reasoning for their behavior as it only serves to perpetuate negative stereotypes. Learners do have opinions, however, a lack of information, and the lack of ability to question the information provided by NJES interlocutors may result in their not actively sharing what they think.

This paper has attempted to explain Japanese learners' hesitance to give their opinions and has argued that learners need not always accept what 'native' speakers say and should be encouraged to develop skills to discover for themselves the validity of arguments and opinions. As such, future research could examine methods designed to help learners develop their background knowledge for both unfamiliar and familiar topics and discriminate the validity of sources.

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