

Communication Apprehension among Japanese College Students

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The main purposes of this study are: (a) to identify the constructs that may generate communication apprehension and to investigate how they influence communication apprehension and reduce the level of willingness to communicate; and (b) to explore the basic mentality underlying these constructs. The data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 10 Japanese female college students and one Vietnamese male student who provided a contrast for the data from the Japanese students. The study suggests that constructs such as perfectionism, competitiveness, 'good-student' mentality and face-protecting orientation may generate communication apprehension and the basic mentality underlying them may be other-directedness.

Key Words: communication apprehension, willingness to communicate, other-directedness, perfectionism, competitiveness

1 Introduction

As human society becomes globalised, English has gained the status of the international 'lingua franca' and has become a necessary skill for being a member of the international community. In such a milieu, it is necessary for Japanese learners of English to have a sufficiently high level of willingness to communicate in English. This study focuses on a sample of serious Japanese learners of English who have a sufficient level of English proficiency and an eagerness to communicate in English but who have not always had successful communication experiences. It should help us, as language-teaching professionals in Japan, to identify the factors that may impede the communicative abilities of our students.

Communication apprehension, which is the mental construct defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78), has been identified as the strongest factor in reducing the level of willingness to communicate (WTC) among Japanese college students (Yashima, 2002; Matsuoka, 2006). Communication apprehension is also identified with a psychological phenomenon called social anxiety (Leary, 1995), where people experience social anxiety whilst speaking before others – an observation also made by Young (1991). Accordingly, communication apprehension is likely to be a primary reason for the avoidance or disruption of communication (McCroskey, Gudykunst, & Nishida, 1985).

In the area of second language research, McCroskey, Gudykunst, and

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Nishida (1985) investigated levels of communication apprehension among Japanese college students while speaking both Japanese and English, and their results showed a high degree of communication apprehension in both languages among those students. In cross-cultural communication apprehension research (Klopf, 1984), the level of communication apprehension of the Japanese was significantly higher than that of other peoples, including Asians such as Koreans, mainland Chinese and Filipinos. These studies suggest that the Japanese people's communication apprehension is high in any language and may be ranked as the highest in the world. This highlights the significance of communication apprehension, the focal point of the present study.

The notion of willingness to communicate was originally developed in the field of first language communication study by McCroskey and Richmond (1987), and is defined as the intention to initiate and to engage in communication when the opportunity is given (McCroskey, 1997). This notion may be useful in elucidating why even serious learners equipped with a high competence in English and high motivation have failed to communicate comfortably in English.

Other-directedness is the other key term in the present study because it may generate or influence communication apprehension, which was suggested in the previous quantitative study (Matsuoka, 2006). Other-directedness refers to mental sensitivity towards the outside world or towards others. The concept of other-directedness is derived from two sources: from Kuwayama (1992), who maintains that the Japanese sense of self is embedded in 'reference-other orientation'; and from Lebra (2004), who postulates that Japanese people instinctively view their self as 'subject I', the unique individual self, and as 'object me', the social self that is affected by others.

In the Japanese socio-cultural context, certain cultural norms like valuing reticence may hinder some English learners from actively verbalizing their thoughts and feelings, even when they desire to communicate and their proficiency level is adequate. Understanding the workings of communication apprehension will be necessary for serious learners of English to raise their level of WTC and to feel comfortable in expressing themselves in English. If the ultimate purpose of learning a foreign language is authentic communication between people of different languages and cultures, as MacIntyre and colleagues (1998) have suggested, communication apprehension must be dealt with during the process of learning English in order to enhance the level of WTC, a key factor in the learners' actual use of English.

The research questions for this study were posited as follows;

- a) What constructs may generate communication apprehension and how do they influence communication apprehension and reduce the level of WTC?
- b) What is the basic mentality underlying these constructs and how is it formed?

2 Methods

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2.1 Participants

Ten female Japanese undergraduate students majoring in nursing at a national university and one male Vietnamese college student participated in this study.

Table 1. Participants

| | Gender | Age | Overseas Experience |
|---|--------|-----|---------------------|
| A | F | 21 | No |
| B | F | 19 | No |
| C | F | 20 | Belgium |
| D | F | 19 | Australia |
| E | F | 20 | No |
| F | F | 20 | No |
| G | F | 20 | No |
| H | F | 21 | No |
| I | M | 20 | No |
| J | F | 21 | Malta |
| K | F | 20 | Canada |

The Japanese students who participated in this study (aged 19 to 22) are diligent workers who passed a highly competitive entrance examination in order to enter university. They have a fundamental knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary as a result of six years of study at secondary school level. Their English proficiency levels are roughly from higher intermediate to lower advanced. They appear to be interested in English and its culture and to be highly motivated to improve their English, particularly their speaking skills. However, despite their desire to improve, it is difficult for many of them to communicate easily and comfortably in English.

The Vietnamese college student, on the other hand, was encountered during an academic research trip. Agreeing to be interviewed for this study, he provided us with an unexpected opportunity to compare and contrast the levels of communication apprehension and WTC among students in other Asian countries with those of the Japanese students. He is 20 years of age, has only a basic knowledge of English, and has had limited opportunities to learn English because he is a part-time student and works extensively in order to support his family. He desires to speak English fluently in order to get a well-paid job (see Table 1).

2.2 Procedures

Semi-structured interviews have been conducted from 2004 to 2007 with the participants, who voluntarily agreed to participate after a full description and explanation of the present study were given. Their confidentiality was guaranteed and they were assured that their participation was totally voluntary and that there would be no consequences of any kind if they chose not to participate.

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Interviews took place from 30 minutes to one hour with each participant, and were not audio or videotaped. All the information gained from the participants was written in field-note form immediately after each interview session was completed. The basic interview questions, which aimed at identifying the relationship between communication apprehension and WTC in English covered: (a) what kind of difficulties they have had in speaking English; (b) how comfortable they have felt in speaking English; and (c) the reasons for (a) and (b). However, more specific and elaborate questions were asked in the process of each interview.

2.3 Analysis

First, the codes were produced based on the data through reading the filed notes from the interviews carefully. Then the similar codes were gathered into one category and each category was named as the constructs of Communication Apprehension. Lastly the in-depth discussion was conducted using the previous studies.

3 Findings

The data from the semi-structured interviews with the ten female Japanese undergraduate students and the one male Vietnamese college student are detailed below, chronologically.

The first interview was conducted with A (female, aged 21) in July 2004. She showed high motivation for learning English, saying that her goal is to contribute to the international community as a nurse. She has had a chance to speak English at an English club, which charges her 500 yen for each two-hour meeting. The club has three levels, including intermediate and advanced. When she took part initially, she was in the intermediate class and participated in English conversation very well, but now she has been moved to the advanced class, where she has been impressed by the other participants and cannot talk as much as she did in the previous group. She has a close friend from Bangladesh and he is a good speaker of English. She wants to speak English with him more fluently. She confessed that she panics when she fails to make herself understood in English. Nonetheless, she is eager to improve her English skills.

The second interview took place with B (female, aged 19) in September 2004. She expected to take more English classes because she is extremely fond of the language. She is also quite interested in learning English abroad and is especially eager to speak English. She finds the culture of the English-speaking world attractive as well. Thus, she has a very high WTC or, at least, high motivation. However, she confessed that she does not have enough resources in English to allow her to express herself in English. She also seeks opportunities to speak English.

The third interviewee C (female, aged 20) talked about an exciting experience she had in Belgium in September 2004. She didn't travel with a package tour, arranged the itinerary by herself and stayed there for three weeks. She used a ready-made program provided by the Center of International English Education for

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the first two weeks but organized the last week in her own way. Now she plans to do a similar thing during the spring vacation. She seemed quite introverted, but she said that after visiting Belgium she feels her personality has changed and she has become more extraverted. In terms of speaking English she feels much more comfortable and confident. She confessed that her WTC in English might even be higher than her WTC in Japanese, citing her experience of staying with a middle-aged Japanese lady in Belgium – she was more hesitant to communicate with her in Japanese than she was with a foreign friend of her age in English. She agreed that Japanese culture might not encourage talkativeness. Certainly she seemed much more positive than before she went to Belgium.

The fourth interview was held with D (female, aged 19) in October 2004. She went to Australia for a home-stay program in the summer and enjoyed it very much. She said she felt comfortable speaking English but that feeling has decreased already. In terms of WTC, she felt more liberated while speaking English with native speakers of English. In the presence of Japanese acquaintances, however, she felt nervous because she wanted them to regard her as a good speaker. She is very outgoing and enjoys a high level of WTC in Japanese. (Interestingly, she heard in Australia that some Japanese staying there for working holidays speak English very confidently even though they are not very sociable in Japanese.) She confessed that after staying in Australia for a while she suddenly felt very comfortable speaking English and even without translating words into English in her mind she was able to express herself in English. She has been a good student all her school life and moreover, she considers herself a perfectionist.

The fifth interview was conducted with E (female, aged 20) in October 2004. She wondered if she might need to do extra English lessons at a language school because she had been shocked to get a low score in a recent English test. She was highly motivated in improving her English and was accustomed to being evaluated as a good student. She had been quite good at English from junior high school through to prep school, but at college she was shocked to discover that her English was poorer than that of the other students. Her confidence in English has been shaken and now she feels she needs to do something. She is interested in going abroad and wants to know what effect doing so would have on her.

The sixth interview in October 2004 was done with F (female, aged 20). She mentioned that she is uncomfortable when her teacher regards other students in her class as being very good at English because she doesn't think they are particularly good. She said she wants to be perceived as being good at English and hates to be looked down upon. Especially, she is afraid of negative evaluation, and she confessed that she is very nervous when she tries to understand English and comes close to panic when she doesn't understand it.

The seventh interview was conducted with G (female, age: 20) in October 2005. She confessed she had lots of opportunities to speak English in her junior high school days but she started to feel nervous about speaking English when she became a high school student. However, she has been a good student and is active as a group leader. She confessed that she may be afraid of making mistakes and she doesn't like her friends to think she cannot speak English. She noticed that her

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classmate who went to the United States for a home-stay visit can speak English better now and she has started to consider going abroad very seriously. She says she does not have confidence in English but she knows she is very good at English grammar and reading English. Also, she pointed out the problem of the English education that she experienced. At her high school, which focuses on preparing for an entrance exam, English teachers emphasized teaching reading and grammatical structures in English. She said she did not have any chances to practise listening at her high school. Now she doesn't understand when native speakers on an audiotape speak English at a natural speed, for instance. She also said she cannot produce words while speaking even though she knows those words passively. She has a high level of WTC in Japanese, though she said she becomes nervous while speaking in front of many people.

The eighth interviewee, H (female, aged 21), who had come from a mission high school, talked a lot about her high school friends in February 2006. She said that many of her high school friends are returnees, students who have returned to the Japanese school system after a spell of study abroad and are highly proficient in speaking English. She said that many of them have very high scores in TOEIC (the Test of English for International Communication), for example, above 800. She believed that her lack of verbal proficiency is caused by her lack of resources in vocabulary and idiomatic expressions in English, and she recognized that she needs to try harder to acquire a larger vocabulary and more expressions. Although she is not aware of having any psychological hindrances, her perception towards her high school friends might have generated an inferiority complex, which in turn might have resulted in communication apprehension.

The ninth interview was conducted with a Vietnamese boy (male, aged 20), who worked as a waiter at the café in Hanoi Airport and was also a part-time college student, in January 2007. He was very friendly and seemed to seek chances to speak English. After taking our order, he initiated the conversation. He showed interest in the present research and described how much he wants to improve his proficiency in oral communication in English. He sounded like he enjoyed speaking English despite the fact that his English resources were limited. He frequently used simple expressions like 'No problem' and 'Thank you'. A low level of Communication Apprehension seems to have helped him exploit his limited resources to the utmost and that has enabled him to develop his language skills.

The tenth interview was held with I (female, age: 21) in April 2007. She is extremely interested in students' motivation about English learning and is going to write her undergraduate thesis about this topic. She went to Malta during the long vacation and had a chance to encounter different people with different cultural backgrounds, and from this she recognized the necessity of speaking English. Since then, she said she has been trying to find every opportunity to use English. She has a high level of motivation and WTC and seems to have a lower level of communication apprehension in speaking English.

In April 2007, the last interviewee J (female, aged 20) talked about her home-stay experience in Canada during the spring recess. She said that she had an extremely enjoyable time and appreciated communicating with people there. She

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feels much more comfortable speaking English now but is afraid that her speaking competency will soon deteriorate in her present environment, where there is limited access to native speakers of English. She confessed that she was the typical 'good student' before entering college and recognized that people in the community also perceived her as being a good student. Thus, she has felt obliged to speak English well and her pride does not allow her to make mistakes in speaking. However, the more careful she is, the more hesitant she feels about speaking. Ironically, then, she feels her English oral proficiency has ultimately become lower.

4 Discussion

With regard to research question (1) (What constructs may generate communication apprehension and how do they influence communication apprehension and reduce the level of WTC?), constructs that may generate communication apprehension were searched for inductively in the interview data as described in the analysis section of methods chapter. As a result, the following four constructs were identified – (a) competitiveness, (b) perfectionism, (c) face-protecting orientation, and (d) valuing reticence (one of the Japanese socio-cultural mores).

The data from the Japanese female undergraduate students illustrate so-called 'good student' mentality, manifested as competitiveness and/or perfectionism. This is in contrast to the data from the Vietnamese boy, who seemingly cannot afford to be either competitive or perfect. Both competitiveness and perfectionism, which are common phenomena in the Japanese context, have been investigated in relation to Communication Apprehension or anxiety (e.g. Bailey, K. M. 1983; Gregersen, T., & Horwitz, E. K., 2002). In addition, the Japanese convention of valuing reticence was apparent and seemed to function as communication apprehension and consequently to reduce the second language WTC. The effort of maintaining face or face-protecting orientation was also detected.

Interviewee A showed her competitive mentality when she was in the advanced class and, knowing that her classmates speak better English, she became less willing to express herself in order to maintain face. Interviewee B did not show explicitly either competitive or perfectionist mentalities. However, acknowledgement of her lack of English resources implies her desire to be perfect, and this may frustrate her desire to speak English. Interviewee C indicated that the Japanese convention of valuing reticence has discouraged her in oral communication. Interviewee D showed a 'good student's' mentality and was afraid of losing face in front of other Japanese people, which may have been caused by competitiveness and perfectionism and has resulted in a higher level of communication apprehension. However, she feels this less when speaking with native speakers of English. Interviewees E and F showed strong competitiveness towards their classmates because they were typical 'good students' and enjoyed their positions of being so. They seem not to accept the reality that other students are better at speaking English, which results in their higher level of communication apprehension. Interviewee G suggested that the careful study of English encouraged communication apprehension and discouraged WTC, which almost leads one to

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endorse the saying that 'ignorance is bliss' – having acquired a considerable knowledge of English, she was now trying to be perfect even though being perfect was impossible. Interviewee H was unaware of her communication apprehension. However, her inferiority complex indicated by her perception of her high school classmates may be evidence of her competitiveness and perfectionism manifesting themselves as communication apprehension and generating a lower level of WTC. Interviewee I observed herself and other students objectively and had become interested in the area of WTC. Her experience in Malta, where she had encountered different peoples, may have subsumed her competitiveness and perfectionism and even the Japanese convention of valuing reticence may not restrain her from communicating orally in English. The last interviewee J showed a 'good student' mentality manifested as competitiveness and perfectionism. She admitted that she wants herself to be perceived a good speaker of English by her Japanese friends and is afraid of losing face, though she felt relaxed and enjoyed communication in Canada. Her mentality is similar to interviewee D, who experienced a similar home-stay program in Australia.

Regarding the research question (2) (What is the basic mentality underlying these constructs and how is it formed?), other-directedness, found to be an indicator of communication apprehension in the previous study (Matsuoka, 2006), should be explored as a candidate for the basic, underlying mentality. This is based on the belief that other-directedness generates communication apprehension and also affects the level of communication apprehension.

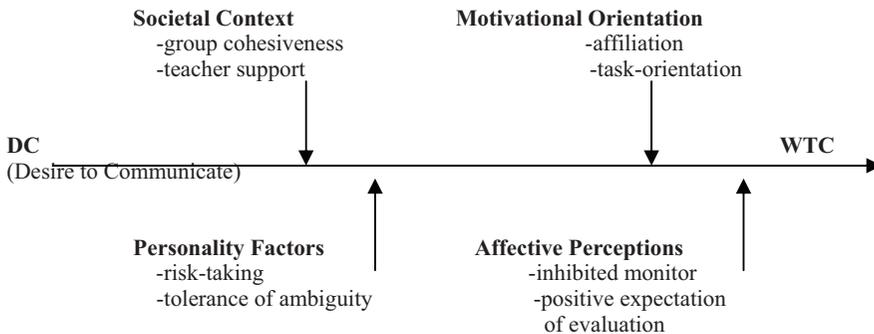
The essence of other-directedness is too much concern by individuals about how other people around them or the 'public' (the 'seken' in Japanese) may perceive them. Consequently, the mentality of other-directedness may form group-oriented and shame-oriented or face-oriented cultures, manifested as competitiveness and perfectionism, which were indicated in the Japanese participants in the present study. Among the Japanese mores, valuing reticence may also be caused by other-directedness in the form of a group-oriented mentality. This is because in Japan it is believed that less verbalization or even silence should be valued in creating harmony and avoiding direct conflict. It is generally believed in Japan that saying nothing is better than causing misunderstandings or trouble by saying something. Another factor in valuing reticence is found in the notion of the high-context society (Hall, 1976), where very little is said to be coded in messages because most of the information is already known, which may also have been generated by a sharing, group-oriented culture.

The following diagram from Wen and Clément's study on second language WTC (2003) in a Chinese context also illustrates the other-directed self. In their study, the other-directed self is believed to result in a face-protecting orientation and an insider effect, which may form a strong sense of belonging to an in-group. They explain, from ideas based in Confucianism, that the existential reality of self is dialectically related to the family, the community, the nation, and the world (Chai & Chai, 1973; also Chai & Chai, 1965, cited in Wen & Clément). It is this notion of self from which a face-protecting orientation may ensue. Consequently, East Asian learners, including Japanese ones, may harbor a higher degree of communication

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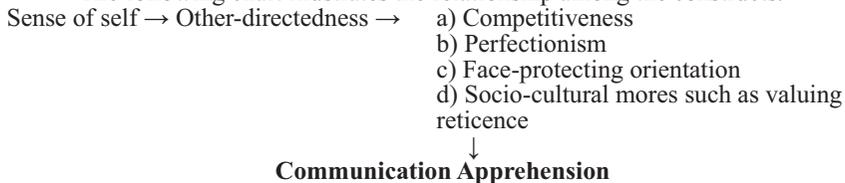
apprehension in any L2, being sensitive to judgment by others. Additionally, the insider effect, manifested as an in-group orientation, may generate a certain distance from members of other groups, an orientation that impedes the interaction with those groups needed in order to ensure L2 communication (Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000).

Figure 1. Variables moderating the relationship between DC and WTC in the Chinese EFL classroom (Wen & Clément, 2003)



As a socio-cultural factor affecting other-directedness, social preoccupation – Lebra’s term (2004) – is projected as the Japanese people’s concern about their immediate world, the ‘seken’. Another socio-cultural factor is relationality in communication, termed by Maynard (1997), which means that the Japanese way of communication is relational and is based on conditions such as whom you are talking to and in what kind of situation the communication takes place. This relationality in communication may be both the cause and effect of other-directedness. The sense of self, which is believed to develop by the self interacting with the social in the Japanese context, is elaborated by Lebra (2004). According to Lebra (2004), the Japanese sense of self is gained by approximating an ideal role and situating oneself in relation to others. Therefore, in principle, the self itself is established through relationality with others, which may call for other-directedness. The sense of self in Japanese people, then, is realised as being the public or collective and the private or personal. In addition, because of relatedness to others, the situated self could demand group cohesion, which may generate a so-called group culture, which in turn strengthens the degrees of other-directedness and communication apprehension.

The following chart illustrates the relationship among the constructs.



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6 Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Interview data from the Japanese female undergraduate students, in contrast with that from a Vietnamese male student, suggested that communication apprehension via other-directedness is manifested as competitiveness, perfectionism, maintaining face and valuing reticence, which in practice have reduced the level of L2 WTC among serious learners of English. In exploring the factors affecting the level of communication apprehension, the causes or factors generating other-directedness, an indicator of communication apprehension, were discussed; and socio-cultural factors, such as social preoccupation, relationality in communication and the Japanese sense of self, were considered.

Based on the results of the present study, some pedagogical implications from previous research can be provided as possible methods for reducing the level of communication apprehension and for raising the level of WTC in English. For example, using humour (McDowell & Yotsuyanagi, 1996) can relax students and reduce the level of communication apprehension. For overcoming perfectionism, Brophy (1996) suggested some useful techniques such as building a friendly, supportive learning environment, creating the perception that mistakes are a normal part of the learning process and explaining how perfectionism is counterproductive. On the other hand, 'audience pleasantness' – that is, a positive response or reaction from one's audience or from other interlocutors – can redress the level of communication apprehension (MacIntyre & McDonald, 1998), because other-directed orientation can function positively when it senses that 'pleasantness', so reducing the level of communication apprehension. Lastly, Levine (2003) discussed the use of L1 in the foreign language classroom. Although L1 use in class is a sensitive issue, its use in a manner appropriate to students' attitudes and aptitude, for instance, may reduce the level of students' nervousness, which is a part of communication apprehension, and enhance the level of WTC. These implications will have to be tested in actual settings and investigated for a future study.

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