

A Teacher's Exploratory Inquiry of Language Awareness: Language Learner Perceptions from Oral Presentations

言語意識に関する調査：オーラルプレゼンテーションにおける学習者の言語 認識

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a teacher-led inquiry into learner language awareness and learner perceptions of: oral presentations using first language (L1) support when using a second language (L2); and L2 learner and user identity. The quantitative-based results of this preliminary inquiry represent a source of understanding for the researcher, who later, intends to undertake a qualitative-based study of learner oriented language awareness and speaking assessment. A questionnaire was distributed to 144 Japanese first and second year tertiary students who completed a semester course in general and academic English. A cross-sectional analysis was applied to the questionnaire results which aimed to gather student perceptions of the use of and identity with a L2, that is, English. Key findings from the exploration of learner perceptions in this research included the acceptance of spoken errors when giving oral presentations and a sense of ownership of English among the participants. This research presents learner perceptions that may prompt teachers to consider conducting language awareness research with their students with the aim of reflecting upon the modification of traditional speaking assessment practices.

KEYWORDS: ELT, language awareness, learner perceptions, oral presentations

要旨

本稿は、第二言語でオーラルプレゼンテーションを行う際に第一言語のサポートを使うことに対する学習者の言語意識と認識、また第二言語使用者のアイデンティティについてのアンケート調査を纏めたものである。この量的調査の結果は、後の学習者の言語意識とスピーキングの評価に関する質的調査の基として使用される。アンケートは一般的なアカデミック英語コースを受講している日本の大学1年生と2年生合計144人を対象に実施された。学生の第二言語である英語の使用とアイデンティティに対する認識に関する情報を集めることを目的にアンケートを行い、断片分析によって考察された。結果として、学生の間で、プレゼンテーション時における言語エラーに対する許容と英語を自らの言葉とする感覚が見られた。この研究結果により、スピーキングの評価を行う際の教員の対応、すなわち学習者の言語をどう修正するかということに影響を与えるであろう学生の言語意識が確認された。

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1. INTRODUCTION

The researcher explored students' perceptions about giving oral presentations in class using their L2 (English) while also having the freedom to use their L1 (Japanese) to support their communication. A review of the literature is provided next with a focus on three main areas: learner perceptions, language awareness (LA), and the development of L2 user identity. This is followed by the methodology section which includes the research design, the activity and participants, and the research questions asked. Lastly, the findings and a discussion of the research conducted is presented. In this current research, the teacher is hereafter referred to as the researcher.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Student Perceptions of their Learning and their Importance to Teachers

It was important for the researcher to understand students' perceptions of their learning in order to understand how they viewed themselves as both learners and users of English and to develop better speaking assessment in the future. In the context of the current research, perceptions of oneself can be defined as how a student understands and makes sense of himself and his learning (Williams & Burden, 1999). As suggested by Tudor (1993), the main role of the teacher in traditional modes of teaching is to supply knowledge. However, the current research valued the knowledge that students had about their learning preferences and the views that they had of themselves as learners and users of English. The role of the teacher is important in the process of facilitating self-reflective practices and in the promotion of learner autonomy among students. As noted by Barfield, Ashwell, Carroll, Collins, Cowie, Critchley, Head, Nix, Obermeier, and Robertson (2001, p. 3), "the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted."

In order to better facilitate self-reflective practices among students and encourage them to think actively and independently, Asmari (2013) recommends that retrospective tasks, such as interviews, group discussion and structured questionnaires be employed to encourage learners to reflect upon learning and help learners to take responsibility for their language learning processes. In the current research, a questionnaire was the selected instrument for data collection. An important point about observing learner perceptions is that "particular ways of experiencing a phenomenon are seen to occur because students attend to different aspects of a phenomenon and experience those aspects in different ways" (Marton & Runesson, 2003, p. 18). Thus, it was important for the researcher to be aware that his students experience a phenomenon, such as language learning, both as individuals and as members of a learning community.

2.2 Language Awareness (LA)

The concept of language awareness (LA) was central to the exploration of learner perceptions as it provided one approach for the researcher to observe student perceptions about their use of English to communicate while engaged in an oral presentation activity. On its website, the Association for Language Awareness (ALA, 2015) defines LA as:

explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use...(and) covers a wide spectrum of fields. For example, LA issues include exploring the benefits that can be derived from developing a good knowledge about language, a conscious understanding of how languages work, of how people learn them and use them...

According to ALA, LA is relevant for the learner and the teacher. LA was important in the current research because it provided a platform for understanding the way students demonstrated their use of language through their oral presentations, and their self-perceptions as English speakers. The researcher was a participant observer in the sense that he was present in the classroom when students prepared and presented their work and was present when the students completed the questionnaire. Subsequently, the researcher gained a partial understanding of students' language awareness as a classroom observer and gained further understanding from the questionnaire results.

The selection of PowerPoint for the oral presentation activity was an attempt by the researcher to incorporate technology into coursework oral assessment criteria. The software was chosen to provide students with opportunities to: do web-based research, work at their own pace, have the freedom to choose their own materials, and achieve a degree of autonomy in the way they used language (Pinkman, 2005).

An important reason for a teacher to consider the implementation of a LA approach in teaching and learning is that: "it is a departure from the traditional top-down transmission of language knowledge that requires least active thinking in learners. Instead, LA can be developed only by learners themselves through paying deliberate attention to language usage" (Lin, 2011. p. 125). Lin (2011) also notes that the evaluation format can be effective in raising LA. In relation to the oral presentation activity utilised in the current study, students were given the opportunity to focus on the criteria outlined in Table 1 and decide whether or not to additionally focus on the accuracy of their grammar and pronunciation despite the omission of these items from the evaluation criteria.

Table 1

Oral presentation evaluation criteria

Name:		Topic:			Score:	
Comments:						
Contents & Timing	Posture	Visual Aids	Eye Contact	Gestures	Volume & Inflection	Questions & Answers
0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2	0 1 2

Note: *Answer key: 0 = poor / 1 = average / 2 = good

In terms of LA, everyone is a learner, even teachers have to continue to explore language systems, so it is a lifelong process (Bourke 2008). According to Wright (2002), a teacher's language awareness encompasses an awareness of his learner's developing interlanguage. Interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) refers to the way a L2 learner approximates the L2 while preserving some features of their L1. Subsequently, the perceptions that students had about their use of interlanguage when giving an oral presentation was an area of interest for the current researcher to pursue.

2.3 L2 user identity: To be or not to be my language?

The researcher explored his students' sense of themselves as users of English in relation to their identity with an L2. The current research viewed an individual's perception as being central to identity formation. The definition of identity offered by Burke and Stets (2009), a set of meanings that define who an individual is when occupying a particular role in society or as a member of a particular group, was instrumental in framing this research. This is because the current research explored the various influencing factors that may shape a student's sense of L2 identity, including global and local cultural influences of the language on the student as both English learner and user.

Kirkpatrick's (2007) view of native speakers as a diminishing best model of English informed the researcher's perspective by providing some initial grounding to approach the issue of L2 identity. Consequently, the researcher sought an understanding from the literature as to how this stance might position his students in terms of their L2 identities. Canagarajah (2005) suggests that L2 speakers often appropriate English in order to meet their localised needs and pursue their localised interests. While Jenkins (2003) notes that many L2 speakers express a desire to preserve something of their L1 accent in order to project their lingua-cultural identity in English. It is also possible that the development of identity among L2 English speakers may sometimes be related to identifications with both local and global cultures, resulting in hybrid identities (Pennycook, 2007). With these views in mind, the researcher explored the possibility that a variety of identity-driven positions existed amongst his students and hence this phenomenon was of value to explore in the current research.

In order to support L2 learner perceptions and the development of L2 identity among language learners, Jindapitak (2013, p. 124) suggests that teachers can encourage their students "to feel free to use their localized versions of English, as long as they are intelligible and comprehensible, without having to worry that these productions will be evaluated vis-à-vis native-speaker benchmark." A justification proffered by Matsuda (2003) for why English as an international language (EIL) learners may benefit from an orientation towards local English varieties is that linguistic assessment in the EIL paradigm does not focus on how closely learners approximate the standards of native speakers, but rather, it realistically focuses on the learners' communicative effectiveness. EIL is defined by Kachru (1992) as being the present state of English that is used as a global language for wider communication. The researcher kept in mind the potential significance of communicative effectiveness for assessment purposes while engaged in the current research. Of particular interest to the researcher was the orientation that his students chose, that is, to target either a native speaker model of English or a local variety of English when giving oral presentations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

A cross-sectional study design was employed to explore the phenomena of language learner identity and learner perceptions of language learner use of L1 and L2 in an oral presentation activity. Primary and secondary data were used in the current research. Primary data was obtained from students who each participated in an oral presentation activity and post-activity questionnaire, see Appendix 1. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open items. In order to minimise the possibility of acquiescence bias (Schuman & Presser, 1996), that is, the tendency to agree, regardless of content, to all questions, particularly when in doubt, the researcher sought a justification for the particular responses made by participants in the questionnaire. Of the questions asked, four questions related to the presentation and the fifth question referred to students' perceptions of language user identity. Participants were requested to write responses in English and use translation software (e.g., Google Translate) for language support. Participants answered anonymously and were individually unidentifiable. An abridged version of the questions follows, see Appendix 1 for the full version:

1. My goal in the presentation was:
 - A - to speak native speaker English.
 - B - to speak as a Japanese speaker of English.
2. Which was more important when you did the oral presentation:
 - A - to speak English with no mistakes or almost no mistakes?
 - B - to speak English with a clear message, but also some mistakes are ok?
3. Do you think it was useful to speak some Japanese when you were presenting?
4. Which Japanese words did you write on your slides or speak during your oral presentation?
5. Japanese is my language, but also English is my language. Agree or Disagree? Why?

The fifth question was included in the oral presentation post-activity questionnaire for comparison to a similar item which appears in a program-wide student end-of-semester questionnaire that all students who study general and academic English are requested to complete. The item is: I don't think that English belongs only to native speakers. It can be my language too. Students are required to select a response of agreement (strongly agree or agree), neutrality, or disagreement (disagree or strongly disagree). All 144 participant responses to the fifth question in the oral presentation post-activity questionnaire were compared with the responses from the aforementioned end-of-semester questionnaire item. The program-wide student questionnaire was conducted in the 2014 spring semester (1279 students) and again in the 2014 autumn semester (1191 students), see Tables 6A and 6B for the results. After tabulating the data, the researcher analysed that data by correlating the responses from participants and totaling the results in terms of percentages.

3.2 Activity & Participants

A cohort of 144 students participated in the oral presentation post-activity questionnaire. Participants were enrolled in either 100 level courses (introductory), 200 level courses (lower-

intermediate), or 300 level courses (higher-intermediate). The four groups that participated in this research in 2014 were: Spring 200s; Spring 300s; Autumn 100s; and Autumn 200s. In the autumn semester, students engaged in a language awareness lecture in their class time. The researcher did not include a language awareness component in spring semester courses because the materials had not been prepared at that time. Preceding the oral presentation activity, three teacher-led workshops during class time were held in order to help students prepare for their presentations. Each class participant completed a three-minute PowerPoint monologic oral presentation which included a dialogic question and answer session with a whole class audience. The post-activity questionnaire, see Appendix 1, was written in both English and Japanese and was completed by each participant at a later date during class time. Responses were written in English only, with some students using translation software to support their written responses. In the 2014 spring semester, 61 second-year students were involved in this study. Among these participants were, 21 (Spring 200 level) students in the College of Liberal Arts and 40 (Spring 300 level) students from the College of Tourism and Hospitality Management. In the 2014 autumn semester there were 83 participants, including 37 first-year (Autumn 100 level) students from the College of Humanities and 46 second-year (Autumn 200 level) students from either the College of Business Administration or the College of Performing Arts.

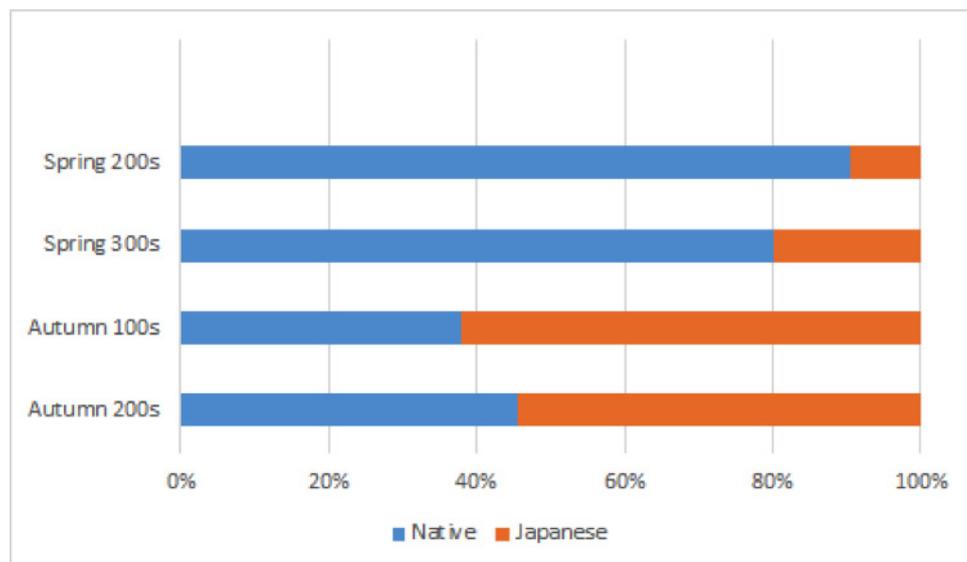
4. RESULTS

Findings were collated from the responses of the 144 learners who completed the oral presentation activity as part of their general and academic English course assessment. From the oral presentation post-activity questionnaire, responses to the first question determined the course level and the other five questions explored learner perceptions of doing the activity and students' use of various lingua-cultural resources in their presentations. As mentioned in the previous section (see Methodology), in the 2014 spring semester, a language awareness component was not included in the course syllabus. However, in the 2014 autumn semester this component was added to the syllabus in time for the oral presentation activity, and as part of an ongoing developmental initiative in the general and academic English program.

On the issue of learners aiming to be either a native English speaker or Japanese speaker of English when giving an oral presentation, the results presented in Table 2 suggest that a greater number of learners in the autumn semester identified themselves as desiring to be Japanese speakers of English when compared to the spring semester responses. This result raises the issue of a possibility that the addition of a language awareness component in the autumn courses may have influenced a shift in students' perceptions about aiming to be a native English speaker or a Japanese speaker of English. Further research would be required to investigate the validity of this assumption.

Table 2

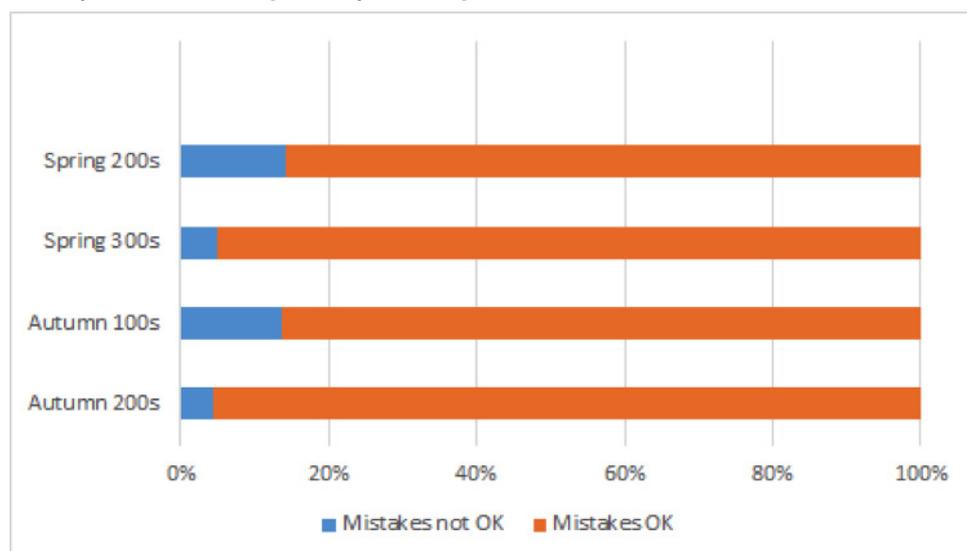
Aim towards a native speaker variety or a local speaker variety of English?



Learners were also asked if they aimed to speak in English either without any mistakes (or perhaps almost no mistakes) or with some mistakes as being acceptable. The results in Table 3 indicate that there was a strong acceptance of some spoken errors with the view to presenting a clear message as being an appropriate goal. Among the possible reasons for this commonly-held view, as evidenced in Table 1, is that the assessment for this activity did not include a spoken accuracy component and so participants viewed the acceptance of spoken errors as appropriate in this communicative context.

Table 3

Acceptance of English speaking mistakes or not?

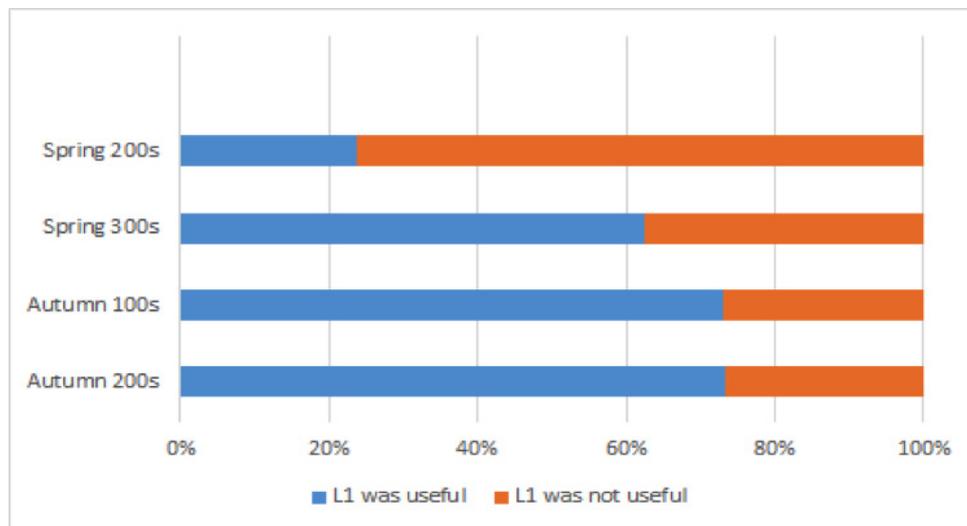


The belief that speaking some Japanese was a useful resource when presenting was strongly affirmed by a majority of participants, see Table 4. The two most commonly selected reasons for the usefulness of Japanese were: (a) it could assist the speaker to communicate the meaning of difficult English words or terms; and (b) it was necessary to help the audience understand presentation-based content. The reason most cited as to why Japanese language

was not useful when presenting was a perception among some students that the purpose of the activity was to learn to present in English in class.

Table 4

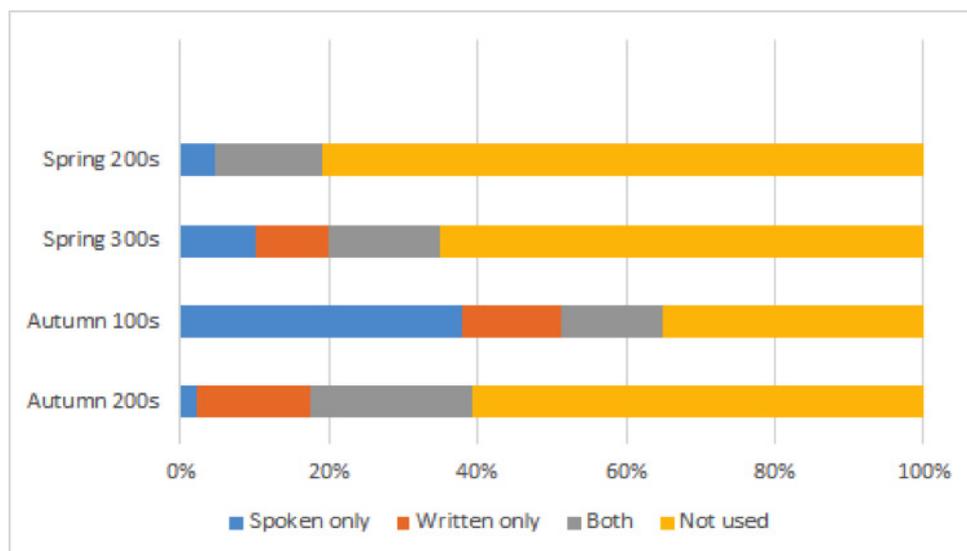
The use of L1 (Japanese) when giving an oral presentation



The actual usage of Japanese, either spoken, written, or both, was significantly higher in the autumn semester when compared to its usage in the spring semester, see Table 5. Perhaps in alignment with the results found in Table 2, and the goal of aiming to be a native speaker of English or a Japanese speaker of English, participant responses exhibited in the 2014 autumn semester questionnaire may have been influenced by the inclusion of a language awareness component in their courses prior to the oral presentation activity.

Table 5

The actual forms of L1 when giving an oral presentation



The perception among participants that both Japanese and English belonged to them was held by a majority of learners in each of the four groups, see Table 6A. The two most commonly cited reasons written by respondents were: (a) English is a common and

popular language in the world; and (b) it is important in the future lives of these participants. However, for those participants who did not perceive English to be their language, the two most commonly selected reasons were: (a) a lack of ability to understand English well; and (b) a lack English use in their lives. When compared with the program-wide results from the 2014 spring and autumn semesters, see Table 6B, all four course level groups, as presented in Table 6A, contained a lower percentage of students who felt that English was their language too. That is to say, Spring 200s, Spring 300s, and Autumn 100s.

Table 6A

English is my language too (post-activity questionnaire)

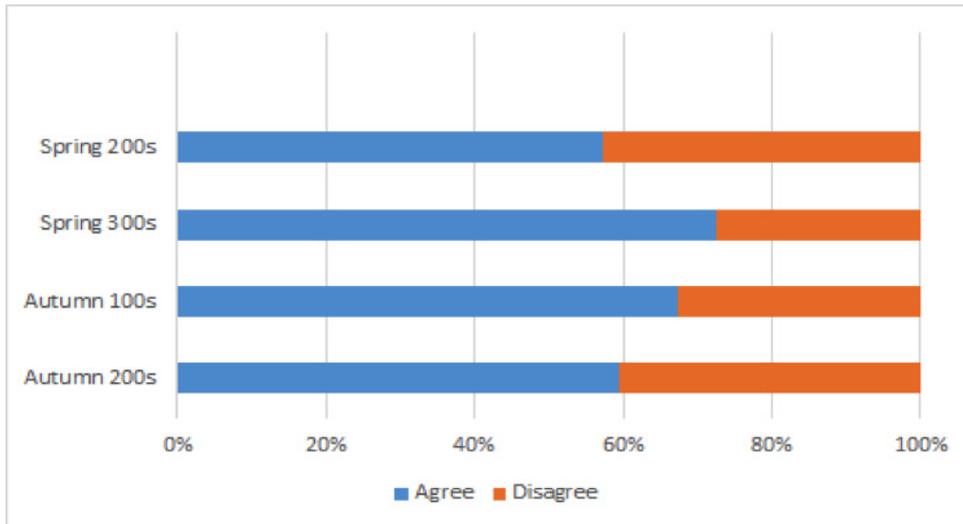
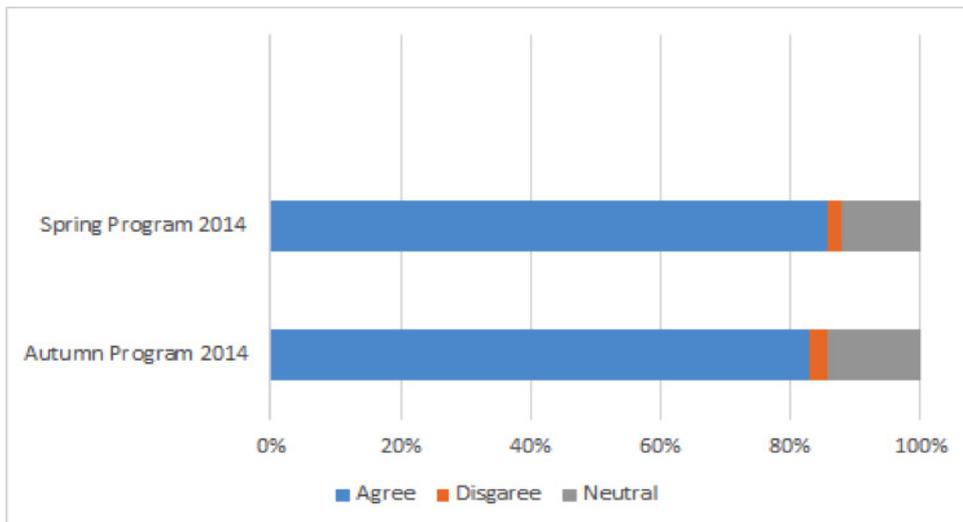


Table 6B

English is my language too (program-wide questionnaire)



5. DISCUSSION

In this section, a discussion is presented on: a) the findings in relation to the literature review, b) limitations and considerations of the current research, and c) the researcher's intention to conduct future research on language awareness.

5.1 Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

The researcher gained an understanding of his students' sense of language awareness. In particular, students demonstrated a non-uniform desire in their determination to aim to be either a native speaker of English or a local (Japanese) speaker of English. Further, language awareness among the students was displayed through the overwhelmingly affirmative perception that speaking with some errors was acceptable when giving an oral presentation. It must be noted that speaking with some errors was understood by participants in the context that when giving an oral presentation they were not evaluated on the accuracy of their grammar or pronunciation. Satisfactory evidence about the value of using L1 to support their oral presentations in L2 was indicated by students' usage of L1, in either written, spoken, or both forms of communication. In regard to the issue of L2 user identity, a majority of respondents indicated that they felt a sense of ownership of English which may be noted as their L2. The researcher intends to conduct future research to explore the phenomenon of multiple language user-identities as a consequence of these findings.

5.2 Research Limitations & Considerations

The results demonstrate associations among the variously studied variables of: a native variety versus a local variety speaker goal; the acceptance of spoken errors when presenting; written and spoken forms of L1 language support when giving an oral presentation in an L2; and a sense of ownership and identity with an L2. However, a cross-sectional research design cannot reveal causation of the phenomena being studied (Gray, 2014). While a longitudinal study may have offered revelations of causation, the respondents in this research were only available to participate during a semester long period. Another disadvantage of the cross-sectional study design used in the current research concerns the feasibility of replicating the results, because again, the participant course groups disbanded at the end of each semester. Also, the oral assessment activity cannot be viewed as generic in design and cannot easily be replicated by a different researcher. There would be some expectant differences in approach between researchers when conducting the oral presentation activity and the post-activity reflection. Despite some limitations in this research, it is possible for a future study to be conducted using an oral presentation activity and post-activity reflection to establish primary data that could be used to compare against secondary data, as was done in the current research.

5.3 Future Research

Findings from the current research show that for a teacher, there are benefits to be gained from conducting an exploratory inquiry into the language awareness of one's students. The cross-sectional analysis of learner perceptions about their language awareness and L2 learner and user identity provides grounding for future research in the form of a small-scale qualitative design (e.g., interviews). It is the researcher's intention to further explore learner perceptions on preparing for and giving an oral presentation, primarily in English. An in-depth inquiry can be expected to reveal further understanding of learner language awareness, which may be of benefit to speaking assessment formulation and implementation.

6. CONCLUSION

It can be understood from the current research and literature review that language learner perceptions are important to both a teacher and a student. A teacher can be influential in the development of how students view their learning and usage of, and identity with, an L2 by encouraging them to be self-reflective, active, and to think independently. Language awareness serves a purpose as a strategy that can aid students to be responsible for their language learning process and can help teachers to develop and improve speaking assessment.

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APPENDIX 1

Oral Presentation Activity Questionnaire

Please circle: ELF 101/102 or ELF201/202 or ELF301/302

1. Please circle (A or B) AかBのいずれかに○をしてください:

A - My goal in the presentation was to speak native speaker English.

プレゼンテーションの目標はネイティブスピーカーのように話すことである。

B - My goal in the presentation was to speak as a Japanese speaker of English.

プレゼンテーションの目標は日本人の英語使用者として話すことである。

2. Which was more important when you did the oral presentation: (circle A or B)

プレゼンテーションを行う際、どちらがより重要でしたか。

A - to speak English with no mistakes or almost no mistakes?

ミスをせずに、または少しのミスだけで話す。

B - to speak English with a clear message, but also some mistakes are ok?

伝えたいことが明確に伝われば、ミスをしていても良い。

3. Do you think it was useful to speak some Japanese when you were presenting?

(circle please) 発表の際、少し日本語を使うことは有益であると思いますか。

Yes or No.

Why? _____

4. Which Japanese words did you write on your slides or speak during your oral presentation? (Please give two or three examples and circle spoken or written)

発表の際に使用した日本語の単語は何ですか。下線部にその単語を日本語と英語で書いてください。また、スライドに書き込んだ日本語は、平仮名、カタカナ、漢字のどちらで書いたかを選んでください。

- i. spoken/written romaji/hiragana/katakana/kanji _____ English _____
- ii. spoken/written romaji/hiragana/katakana/kanji _____ English _____
- iii. spoken/written romaji/hiragana/katakana/kanji _____ English _____

5. Japanese is my language but also English is my language. (circle one answer)

日本語は私の言語であるが、英語もまた私の言語である。(どちらかに○をし、理由を説明してください。)

Agree or Disagree.

Why? _____