

Affect and Perceptions on a Multilingual Campus: Students' Perspectives on Second Language Use

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Abstract

This article is within the field of research into affective individual differences in second language acquisition, with narrower informal, unstructured communication in the second language (English) of adult language learners. It examines learners' perceptions of how affective variables (such as anxiety, self-confidence and communication apprehension), work together with cognitive variables (such as motivation, learner beliefs), and particular context-specific variables (e.g. availability of native speakers, or other non-native speakers of English for practice) in influencing second language use in the multilingual environment of a university campus.

The study is based on the grounded theory analysis of the transcripts of twenty students' qualitative interviews. The process of data interpretation provided the basis for the creation of a grounded theory model for the factors influencing second language (L2) use in informal interaction and the relationship between them in the particular setting. Such a model helps give insight into the way learners themselves perceive their language education and informal interaction.

Keywords: affective variables, grounded theory approach, informal L2 interaction, learner beliefs and perceptions, willingness to communicate.

Introduction

English as a lingua franca sets new demands for the command and usage of the language. Together with these demands, the recent change in pedagogical orientations and second language acquisition research into communicative language teaching are shifting the emphasis in language learning to a more practical dimension, with a focus on the learner and on providing him or her with opportunities for interaction and more active language use.

However, when second language (L2) learners step outside the classroom and as language users try to manage a meaningful communication in the target language (TL),

they are faced with new challenges such as learning to cope with one's endangered ego, or acquiring the skill to monitor or control one's emotions in order to better realize one's knowledge in the process of interaction.

Communication in an L2 is generally accompanied by anxiety, frustration, and a feeling of insecurity, which may hinder the process and turn it into a struggle; however, for some, it brings feelings of security, self-confidence, and strong motivation, which may help and encourage them towards improvement.

There has been a great deal of interest on affect, and constructs from the affective domain such as motivation, anxiety, etc., and how they influence L2 acquisition or achievement. Recently, L2 use has been increasingly associated with willingness to communicate (WTC), which is considered the most immediate predictor of engaging in interaction (MacIntyre et al. 1998). Other variables traditionally recognized as important are motivation—the majority of the studies in the field are still governed by Gardner and Lambert's framework for investigation (Gardner and Lambert 1972; Gardner 1985)—and anxiety—there has been uniform opinion on the inverse relationship between anxiety and achievement (Aida 1994).

However, even though fostering communicative competence and WTC are currently considered the main goals of language education (Widdowson 1978; Canale and Swain 1980; MacIntyre et al. 1998), studies focusing on affective influences on unstructured L2 communication have been scarce.

Thus, the main foci of the current study is how university-level students in a multilingual campus perceive the opportunities they are offered for informal interaction¹ in a second language (English), and what possible individual variables from the affective domain influence their behavior, as recognized by the students, which will give deeper insights into which of these variables operate in the specific setting, and how they interrelate and interplay. Attention will be directed to comparison between Japanese and non-Japanese subjects, and eventual differences in the perceptions they might have, or the problems they might come across.

The rationale behind the latter objective is that the predominant opinion of English language teaching (ELT) in Japan is that it is failing to achieve its goals. There is an overwhelming amount of commentary from the mainstream media, social sciences and applied linguistics about the surprising lack of success of Japanese students in the process of English language acquisition (McVeigh 2002).

The Japanese learning context is an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) one. This generally means that the TL, in this case English, is not spoken as a native language.

¹ Interaction or communication can be accomplished both in spoken and written modes. As this article focuses on face-to-face interaction between students in spoken mode, 'speaking,' 'communication,' and 'interaction' will be used interchangeably.

Its instruction is predominantly organized by formal institutions, and suggests scarce opportunity for unstructured, informal language use.

Taking these factors into account, exploring a different type of educational context (in Japan) and investigating the structure of its environment in relation to language acquisition seem a compelling task.

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) is an international university, where students from different national and cultural backgrounds (81 countries) meet, study, and interact. There are two basic languages in which the education is being conducted: English and Japanese. The students can choose one of the languages as their basis for instruction, and additionally attend language or lecture classes in the other language. The students are attending APU (a tertiary-level institution) after the end of the so-called ‘examination hell,’ meaning that the psychological pressure for achievement, as well as their instrumental motivation, should be lowered.

Another difference of APU from the general ELT context in Japan is that if a student wants to take advantage of the situation and function fully, i.e. gaining the benefits of international communication, he or she is supposed to use another language. In this respect, APU’s campus resembles an immersion environment, characterized by informal, unstructured interaction, unlike any other institution in Japan. In fact, one of the overt goals of the university is to promote and foster multiculturalism, and international communication (Declaration on the Occasion of the Opening of APU 2000).

As a whole, this is a small-scale, pilot study which aims to verify the impact of a multicultural campus on students’ perceptions of their second language development. It tries to determine to what extent the context influences motivation, WTC, anxiety, inhibition, etc., and the perceived effect on students’ non-linguistic outcomes.

In order to pursue its aims, the study employed a qualitative, inductive framework: a grounded theory approach for exploring the relevance of the assumption that the students will interact in L2, having been brought together. Even though the majority of similar studies have been conducted within the quantitative paradigm, a qualitative approach appears to be the most suitable, having in mind that “all the concepts pertaining to a given phenomenon have not yet been identified, at least not in this population or place” (Strauss and Corbin 1998). It also answers a call for a more qualitative way of examination of the affective variables (Dornyei 2005; Yan and Horwitz 2008).

The following research questions guided the study:

1. According to the students, to what extent does the unique multilingual/multicultural environment at APU promote willingness to communicate?
2. Is there awareness of the specific characteristics of the language learning

environment?

3. According to the students, which variables from the affective domain (such as anxiety, motivation, willingness to communicate, etc.) are most likely to interfere with interaction?
4. Are there any significant differences between the perceptions of the Japanese and the non-Japanese subjects on the effective use of English for informal communication?

The study will proceed as follows. Firstly, some insights from previous research on individual affective differences will be addressed. Secondly, the results of the study will be presented in the form of a theoretical model for L2 use, and then differences between the Japanese and non-Japanese students will be discussed according to the components of this model.

Theoretical Basis

Affect is generally understood as “emotion or feeling,” and the “affective side of human behavior is usually juxtaposed to the cognitive side” (Brown 1994). Compared to the cognitive individual differences, such as intelligence and aptitude, the affective ones are much more unstable and often changing.

Since the current study is concerned with individuals’ perceptions and feelings about the L2 learning process in a multilingual context, it seems appropriate to dedicate attention to the theoretical and empirical research on some of the individual differences that have been found to exercise direct influence on language use: anxiety, willingness to communicate, international posture.

Anxiety

Anxiety is frequently discussed in the literature in terms of its connection to language learning. Foreign language anxiety has been related to difficulties and deficits in listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, word production, and reduced test performance (Horwitz and Young 1991), and foreign language classes are perceived to be among the most anxiety-provoking subjects (MacIntyre 1995).

One of the more recent conceptualizations of language learning anxiety is a situation-specific personality trait having two psychological components: “emotional arousal and negative self-related cognition” (MacIntyre 1995: 91). Horwitz et al. (1986) define anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors, related to classroom language learning, arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.” Foreign language anxiety is characterized by the following dimensions:

1. Communication apprehension: fear and avoidance of interaction
2. Fear of negative evaluation: distress about other people's opinion and evaluation, and a constant expectation of negative evaluation
3. Test anxiety.

Because of their obvious connection to the matters this study is concerned with, communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation will be discussed here.

According to McCroskey (1984: 13) communication apprehension (CA) is defined as "a person's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons." CA results in communication avoidance or withdrawal. Discomfort in interacting with others in an L2 is caused by the "mismatch between foreign language students' mature thoughts and their immature second/foreign language proficiency" (Horwitz et al. 1986).

Fear of negative evaluation is a characteristic feature of people who are very concerned about the impression they leave on others, so they are very concerned about the appearance of their proficiency or their attempts at interaction.

A study of CA and its relationship to self-perceived competence in English (McCroskey, Fayer and Richmond 1985) showed that the subjects reported low self-ratings of proficiency and higher levels of communication apprehension. A quantitative study by MacIntyre et al. (1997) examined the interrelationship between anxiety and perceived and actual competence, and discovered that "anxiety correlated negatively with both actual and perceived proficiency in the L2" (MacIntyre et al. 1997: 278). A high level of anxiety usually results in students' avoidance of interaction, which deprives them of the chance to improve their language abilities in communication, and of the opportunity to assess their competence in authentic communication.

In a qualitative study, Yan and Horwitz (2008) proposed a theoretical model of "how anxiety works with a larger number of learner and situational variables" (Yan and Horwitz 2008: 153) by exploring students' viewpoints and perceptions in terms of language learning anxiety, its causes and consequences for the EFL process. They confirmed the results of previous research on the negative impact anxiety exercises on the language outcome (e.g. Aida 1994; Horwitz et al. 1986, etc.).

Willingness to communicate

In addition to anxiety, WTC also provides answers to the question why some learners seek and others avoid communication. WTC is defined as "the probability of engaging in communication, when [an individual is] free to choose to do so" (in MacIntyre et al. 1998: 546).

In a study of WTC in the Canadian context, MacIntyre and Clement (1996 cited in MacIntyre et al. 1998) revealed that motivation influenced WTC in L2, which resulted in

an increased frequency of communication. The findings of that study were in line with MacIntyre and Charos (1996), who found that WTC and motivation predict frequency of interaction.

By combining psychological, communicative and linguistic approaches, MacIntyre et al. (1998) created a heuristic model for WTC, which being very comprehensive is useful in describing L2 communication. The model, a six-level pyramid, combines factors, both internal and external to the individual, such as personality, L2 self-confidence, intergroup climate, intergroup attitudes, etc., some of which are trait-like, others which are contextually specific. The model explains how these factors intertwine and influence WTC (which in turn predicts L2 use). The two strongest predictors of WTC, communication anxiety and perceived L2 communication competence, are integrated in the model as the single construct of L2 self-confidence (Clement 1980), which is considered the single strongest influence on WTC.

International posture

In the Japanese EFL context, WTC was addressed by Yashima (2002), who examined factors of influence on L2 communication and learning, by applying the WTC model and Gardner's Socio-educational Model as a framework. The results of her study showed that international posture influenced motivation, which then predicts communication confidence. Both confidence in L2 abilities and international posture appeared to be pretty strong predictors of WTC (Yashima 2002: 63).

International posture is a notion corresponding to a certain extent to Gardner's integrative orientation. However, in the Japanese EFL context, in which contact with native speakers (NSs) is limited, attitudes are being formed on the basis of information acquired from indirect sources (e.g. media), and therefore learners "are not likely to have a clear affective reaction to the specific L2 language group" (Yashima 2002). English is, for the Japanese learners, more a symbol of the "surrounding world," and a means to communicate with foreigners, rather than an indicator for belonging to a specific TL community.

This orientation was labeled as 'intercultural friendship orientation,' which together with instrumental orientation predicted motivation, which accounted for proficiency. In an article with a similar aim, i.e. to investigate the influence of affective variables and learners' attitudes, Yashima et al. (2004) presented two studies conducted with Japanese learners of English. The conclusion was that individuals who are more willing to communicate, are also more willing to initiate interaction, and that self-confidence is of crucial importance to WTC. Also, the students with high international posture (expressed in the desire to be involved in international vocation, and interest in international affairs) were more willing to interact in the TL, and were

also more motivated to study.

In summary, previous research on WTC has shown that self-confidence (as a combination of perceived L2 competence and L2 communication anxiety) is the strongest predictor of WTC which, in turn, is the factor of immediate influence on L2 language use.

As for the relation between the context of the present study and the construct of WTC, it is expected that the students have taken into account the international environment of the university prior to enrollment, which may suggest a higher level of trait-like WTC. But verifying the existence of situation-specific WTC needs further exploration.

Methodology

Setting

The process of second language acquisition is usually associated with ‘learning’ a language in a natural environment, namely in the country in which the language is spoken. However, the term may refer to acquiring a second language (L2) in a natural way (by means of communication and interaction), without formal instruction.

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) is the setting of this research. While the campus is not exactly a native speaker context, it simulates it to a certain extent in the way that education is organized. Students can choose between English and Japanese as the base language for instruction, and additionally have language classes in the other language. This, and the fact that APU is a true multicultural and multilingual environment, provides the students with a unique opportunity to practice their target language (TL), whether it is English or Japanese, outside the classroom and in a context which very much resembles the natural one.

The study poses the question of how this unique environment facilitates the acquisition of English and to what extent an environment of native and other non-native speakers of English actually influences the development of EFL students’ speaking skills, if at all (students do not count exclusively on interaction, they receive formal training as well). Supposedly, the environment exercises a direct influence on motivation, WTC, inhibition and other variables from the affective domain. The students, on the other hand, determine interaction (and subsequently the language outcome).

Objectives

This study collected data on students’ perceptions of the existence and role of external (environmental) factors affecting interaction, and data on individual differences (more specifically affective variables, and learners’ beliefs) in order to make a comparison

between Japanese and non-Japanese students. The study also sought to find out if there is a difference in their beliefs and perceptions about studying English in general, whether there are any problems or difficulties when speaking English, and to what extent these students are taking advantage of the opportunity to practice English.

Participants

The participants in the research were 19 university-level students (between 19 and 31 years old) both Japanese and international: from Myanmar, South Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand (see Table 1). The Japanese students were all Japanese basis, who were either currently attending the Advanced I level English course at APU or had just finished it, whereas the international students were either Japanese basis (three students) at the same level of English (Advanced I), or English-basis students (five students). In terms of standardized language testing, all the participants had achieved a TOEFL score of around 500.

Table 1: List of Participants in the Study

	Age	Gender	Nationality	Department	Language Basis	Years of English Learning Experience
Student A	19	M	Japan	APS	Japanese	8-Jul
Student B	20	F	Japan	APS	Japanese	8
Student C	31	M	Myanmar	APS	Japanese	More than 15
Student D	24	F	Myanmar	APS	Japanese	10
Student E	19	F	Japan	APS	Japanese	8
Student F	20	F	Japan	APS	Japanese	8
Student G	21	F	Japan	APS	Japanese	7
Student H	20	F	Korea	n/a	Japanese	13
Student I	19	F	Japan	APS	Japanese	7
Student J	21	F	Japan	APS	Japanese	9
Student K	21	F	Japan	APS	Japanese	10
Student L	19	M	Japan	APS	Japanese	7
Student M	20	F	Japan	APS	Japanese	14
Student N	21	F	Japan	n/a	Japanese	8
Student O	23	F	Vietnam	n/a	English	9
Student P	19	F	Thailand	APS	English	n/a
Student Q	22	F	Thailand	APS	English	n/a
Student R	22	F	Indonesia	APS	English	n/a
Student S	20	M	Indonesia	APS	English	n/a

Note: APM = College of International Management; APS = College of Asia Pacific Studies.

Data collection instrument

The data collection tool selected for the study was the semi-structured interview because it can provide access to learners' emotional states which are not easily observed and, by giving the participants the opportunity to recall experiences or details from events, it also helps them consciously reflect upon their feelings or language behavior. Another advantage of the qualitative interview is that, if required, some points can be additionally clarified, which is quite useful, especially when the interviews are not conducted in the participants' first language.

An initial semi-structured format (interview protocol) was created on the basis of findings in the literature on motivation and affect in language learning, and then it was trialed on four students (two of them Japanese and two international).

Data collection procedure

Due to the nature of the grounded theory approach used in this study, the interview protocol was utilized only as a starting point for the interviews, so the questions asked were not limited by the protocol.

Before each interview, the purposes of the study were explained to the participants, and the voluntary nature of their participation was emphasized. Each interview was conducted in English and lasted between 35 to 50 minutes. All interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the students and subsequently transcribed.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted in three general stages (Yan and Horwitz 2008). The first stage included thematic analysis in order to compare ideas in the data, recognize and group together themes which emerge as similar or matching one another (Strauss and Corbin 1998). During the second stage an affinity diagram was generated. The third stage utilized interrelationship digraph analysis in order to establish relationships between the variables. Based on the three stages of analysis, a grounded theory model of L2 used in a multilingual campus was created.

Findings and Discussion

Definition of variables

During the second stage of the data analysis, 12 variables relating to learners' beliefs, and feelings associated with the language environment and informal interaction, were generated. These are as follows:

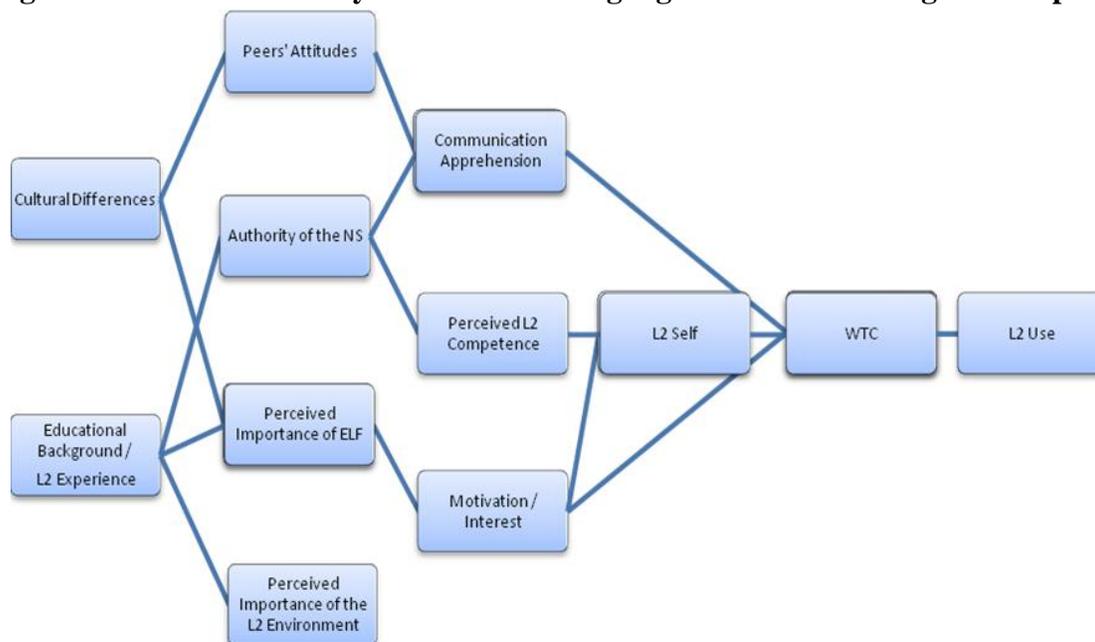
1. *Cultural differences*: Students' comments referred to the social and cultural differences the interviewees perceived to exist between learners from different

- countries. These were often stereotypical views about patterns of interaction in general or attitudes towards L2 (which in this case is English).
2. *Educational background and L2 experiences*: Educational background in terms of years of formal instruction of English, study abroad experiences, and in-class teaching practices. L2 Experiences mean particular events in a student's life, related to either the study or the real-life usage of English which are perceived as influential (sometimes as a turning point) in a subject's language learning/using experience.
 3. *Perceived importance of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)*: Students' comments about the importance of English in a globalizing world, not only as one of the foreign languages they could master, but as an imposed necessity.
 4. *Peers' attitudes*: The attitudes towards the language, and the evaluation of one's language ability against that of their peers. These attitudes prove to be very important, because they seem to be able to inhibit or enhance communication, or the desire for it.
 5. *Authority of the Native Speaker (NS)*: The native speaker is recognized as a criterion for proficiency. Even when not present in actual interaction, the native speaker appears to be the aspired norm. When present, a native speaker often has the power to inhibit the non-native speaker.
 6. *Perceived importance of the L2 environment*: A multilingual environment, with lots of opportunities both for informal L2 practice, and chances for 'broadening one's horizon' through cross-cultural communication. According to students' comments, it is a main factor in influencing their choice of university and is usually perceived as an advantage.
 7. *Perceived L2 competence*: This means the level of English the students think they have. It is the feeling that the student can function efficiently (or not) when experiencing real-life interaction.
 8. *Communication apprehension*: Feeling of uneasiness and discomfort when faced with (L2) communication. Students with high apprehension tend to avoid the initiation of interaction or the interaction itself.
 9. *Motivation*: The drive, desire to communicate with NSs or other non-native speakers (NNSs) of English in order to practice. It is perceived to be both affective and cognitive: associated with interest, sustained effort, goals, and others.
 10. *L2 self*: A multifaceted factor, encompassing several personality aspects related to L2 learning and use: extroversion and introversion, activeness and passivity, perceived aptitude, etc.
 11. *Willingness to Communicate (WTC)*: This stands for the desire to engage in interaction in a particular situation, when having the opportunity to do so. In the

context of this study it also includes creating an opportunity for communication.

12. *L2 Use/interaction*: Comments referring to engaging in actual behavior, when the student either initiates a conversation, or helps sustain one.

Figure 1: Grounded Theory Model of L2 Language Use in a Multilingual Campus



The themes/variables were organized in a model of L2 use, and were classified into six categories from left to right (Figure 1). The first category includes variables from the domain of the learners' social, educational, and L2 learning history. The second is comprised from situational context variables. The third category consists of factors from the affective and cognitive domain of the learners. The fourth category represents behavioral intention and the last one the outcome of the interrelation between all the other levels: *L2 Use/ Interaction*, which is actual behavior.

Comparative interpretation of Japanese and non-Japanese students' responses

Cultural differences

Initially, questions about how culture, in terms of shared patterns and values, influences the language learners were not included in the interview protocol. However, it subsequently became evident that it was an essential part of the way students made sense of their approach to both L2 learning and L2 communication.

Culture essentializing explanations for the successes or failures in learning English are frequent (especially in the case of Japan). There are arguments (Kubota 1999) that when it comes to English education in Japan, the majority of research in the applied

linguistics literature tends to stereotype and essentialize the Japanese language learner, attributing to him or her qualities such as passivity, introversion, lack of initiative and striving to attain instrumental goals, namely exam-passing. Culture is not given as an explanation for achievement in general by the interviewees, but rather as a reason for a person to engage in, or refrain from, interaction. There was a striking difference in opinions between the Japanese and the international students: the Japanese students gave ‘culture’ as a reason for their attitude and behavior on campus far more often than students from other nationalities. The immediate manifestation of ‘culture’ was shyness.

Shyness seemed to explain the phenomenon of avoidance of L2 communication which was somehow mysteriously shared by everybody as a Japanese national language learning trait. Even the students who perceived themselves as open and active communicators were of the opinion that “the rest”, i.e. the majority of the Japanese learners, were all sharing the common trait of shyness:

[A] Japanese characteristic is [that they are] a kind of shy people. Japanese often get shy when they speak English. They feel they are inferior. When they are not good at something they feel shy.

(Student A)

Or:

They are really shy. Because they have had the society for themselves.

(Student N)

The second comment is referring both to the relatively recent political and economic “opening up” of Japan to the outside world, and to the fact that it is a monolingual society. Both comments are from Japanese students. It is interesting how they distance themselves from ‘the society’ as a whole.

Other qualities which were perceived as common among Japanese students were sensitivity and self-consciousness, manifested in fear of the remarks of their peers, and fear of negative feedback.

Stereotypical opinions and generalizations about shared L2 characteristics in a culture or nationality can also be found among the comments of the international students:

I: Are Indonesians good [at] English?

Student R: Well, most of the people say that. They say that Indonesians are good [at] English, because we have like this flexible tongue, unlike other people.

(Student R)

Educational background and L2 experiences

Interestingly, most of the students interviewed seemed eager to discuss their former

formal education in English, even though they were not explicitly asked to do so. Many of them (especially students from Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam) pointed to the teacher-centered language classroom as a reason for their perceived underdeveloped communicative skills. According to them the passive role of the student, who is only expected to receive information/knowledge and mushroom vocabulary and grammar rules, deprived them of the chance to actually use the language, and moreover fostered their anxiety and uneasiness when opportunities for L2 use actually occurred.

The length of English study was viewed as a factor of considerable importance, especially by learners who had started L2 learning comparatively early (elementary school). They perceived this as giving them an advantage over the learners who had started L2 learning later, especially in terms of opportunities for practice and getting to feel more at ease with the language.

Students had generally positive attitudes about studying abroad and exchange program participation. The majority seemed to have had such experiences, of varied length, mainly in countries from the 'inner circle' of English-speaking countries (Kachru 1985), such as the UK, USA and New Zealand, with a few exceptions, such as a couple of students who had been to Singapore (the 'outer circle').

I've been to America. Colorado...I think it's great. From when I ... woke up, I had to speak English.

(Student N)

Interestingly for the Japanese students, study abroad was considered an inevitable step for anybody who aimed at improving their English language ability.

Included within this category are the particular L2 events, experiences or people that students perceived as crucial in their L2 learning experience. Encounters with NSs/other NNSs could enhance or inhibit their learning:

Sometimes they (NSs of English) are pointing out that we have [an] accent (NSs of Japanese) and our accent is funny ... How can they not accept us? ... They are studying Japanese now, and they have [an] accent, but we appreciate the effort.

(Student B)

Some students had enjoyable and stimulating experiences, which helped them stay focused, motivated, and willing to improve.

Perceived importance of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

Even though students varied in their opinions and attitudes about ELF (some made value judgments and thought it either good or bad), the majority seemed to perceive English as an important common language. The ability to speak English was not only seen as an

opportunity to communicate with people from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds, but also as a necessity in order for the individual to function efficiently in the modern world:

English is widely used. In my country it is compulsory. You need English for information, especially for [the] Internet.

(Student R)

Or:

Maybe if I speak really good English, I will be able to find a job in an international company.

(Student N)

Peers' attitudes

Most students interviewed attached great importance to the attitudes their significant others expressed about their performance in English, or about the importance of English skills in general:

Sometimes they laugh at me, but as a joke, so I don't care.

(Student F)

The importance of peer attitudes was also shown by Japanese students in general, and some Thai students, who were extremely sensitive to comments on their English expressed by students of their own nationality. This greatly inhibited their willingness to engage in interaction.

Authority of the Native Speaker (NS)

Students perceived as NSs only those people who came from countries of the 'inner circle' (Kachru's definition of the inner circle includes Canada, the UK, the USA, New Zealand and Australia). These speakers were the aspired norm; they were the ones setting the rules of what is perceived as acceptable or right, in terms of accent, and ways of expression.

But even though they had such clear opinions (the majority of Japanese students stating American English was their preferred variant of English), their knowledge about the actual distinction between the 'Native Englishes' was somehow superficial or blurry, and was mostly connected to the accent:

Not New Zealand, no. I am worried about the accent ... I want to speak like native speaker, American.

(Student A)

Perceived importance of the L2 environment

All subjects, with no exceptions, were aware of the fact that the university they were enrolled in provided a unique opportunity for foreign language practice (not only English). Some of the students stated that this was the main reason for coming to APU:

I wanted to study abroad, but it [costs] much money, and I heard that APU is like a small world, so I came here. It is very diverse.

(Student E)

Or:

I wanted to study English in university and my teacher recommended me this university. You can really talk to people here, not just study in [a] classroom. And you can study subjects in English.

(Student M)

Perceived L2 competence

All the learners had some idea about their level of English, how much more they wanted to improve, and the learning or communicative strategies that might be suitable for them. Perceived L2 competence includes the beliefs which learners hold both about their general proficiency in English, and about their communicative abilities in the L2. Not surprisingly, there were two general trends in the learners' opinions: students tended to view themselves as either learners with a 'decent' level of English, who may be still far from what is considered a proficient speaker, but whose English was good enough to help them in their academic and social life, or students who were generally dissatisfied with their language ability. The former (predominantly non-Japanese students) felt comfortable even when breakdown in communication occurred, because they knew the kind of strategies to employ in order to overcome such breakdowns.

English is not a problem for me.

(Student R)

The second type of learners—those who expressed dissatisfaction with their L2 abilities—were less self-confident and more insecure in communication. They manifested two different general tendencies: to avoid interaction due to lack of confidence, or to deliberately pursue L2 interaction as a means of language practice.

I need to improve my English skills first of all. Because if I can't understand what they speak in English, I can't understand themselves.

(Student J)

Among all the students there was also an unclear distinction between performance

versus real mastery of the language.

Communication apprehension

Feelings of uneasiness and distress when faced with real-life interaction, or connected with expectations about interaction were reported by some of the students. As mentioned above, according to some, it was stemming from their natural shyness, others were afraid of negative peer evaluation, and yet others stated completely different factors as sources of anxiety, and reasons not to get involved in communication:

When there is a person, I will not start talking to him. I need a reason, like taking a class together, or joining a circle. Just like that, I will not talk to him...I am afraid I will break the..., break the balance. This is Japanese culture, I think.

(Student L)

There is some evidence in the literature that (usually) the ability to process language of introverted learners slows down when faced with real-life interaction, because the level of anxiety they feel is more than their capacity to cope with it.

Other subjects, on the other hand, stated that they did not feel uneasy when they faced interaction. Instead they enjoyed it and even though they knew that their English was sometimes not perfect, they were willing to practice in order to improve it (only a couple of the Japanese subjects said this, as opposed to almost all the international). This type of L2 user was really 'speaking to learn':

I try to do my English best at the moment.

(Student N)

Motivation

Motivation and interest can be divided into two categories depending on what the desired outcome is: motivation for L2 practice, or motivation and interest in getting to know other students. In the first case, instrumental, intrinsic, and extrinsic types of motivation were observed. In the second, a type of motivation which resembled Gardner's concept of integrative orientation, and Yashima's international posture was reported:

I met a friend and I like her very much. I am trying to improve my English because she doesn't speak Japanese. So I am trying to improve my English now. That is my motivation. That's why I am taking TESOL and Advanced English I (classes in English).

(Student Q)

Such interest was displayed more amongst the Japanese students from the sample.

L2 self

This factor is a rather interesting one. It includes some personality characteristics, such as agreeableness, openness, extroversion, each of which the students perceive as either an advantage or disadvantage in language learning and use. These features will be referred to as ‘aspects of self.’ Several such self-aspects, both cognitive and affective, were viewed as important by the students more often than other aspects.

Among the most common aspects was perceived aptitude, or the perceived innate ability for L2 learning. If language aptitude is considered the strongest predictor of achievement, together with motivation, in the literature on individual differences (IDs) research (see, for example, Dornyei 2005; Ellis 1994; Skehan 1989), and it is relatively stable and can be measured objectively with standardized tests, perceived L2 aptitude is what the student him- or herself believes they are endowed with on the basis of prior L2 experiences. It might not correspond to the ‘objectively measured’ aptitude. Unlike perceived L2 competence, it is not subject to change.

Another self-aspect frequently manifested in the subjects’ responses is perfectionism. Even though none used this term explicitly to describe themselves, a lot of them manifested features and practices associated in the literature with perfectionism, such as procrastination (in their case procrastination in taking a step towards real-life interaction), or the desire to show a ‘perfect’ outcome:

I don’t want to show the process (L2 learning process). I want to show the product. I am not confident.

(Student A)

Extroversion/introversion, agreeableness, and risk-taking were also commented on as self-aspects.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Even though students expressed a high level of interest in communication with people from other cultures, and a general desire to engage in this communication in English, the majority (especially among the Japanese students) reported very rare interaction in English, compared to interaction in their L1. Only four students (out of twenty) were actively using English in their daily life on campus (in their circle and club activities, and in conversations with friends). Few students actually had roommates from other nationalities, which suggested the use of English as the language for interaction, but even some of them reported Japanese as more often employed.

I like to talk to people from different countries, different cultures, it’s interesting.

(Student C)

L2 Use/interaction

The actual use of English for interaction between students from different nationalities is a purpose for some of the students, and one of the purposes of the educational institution itself. As mentioned above, even though interaction in English was perceived as crucial both for language practice and as a means of introduction to other cultures and people, the students (both Japanese and non-Japanese) were reporting 'insufficient' interaction, both in terms of quantity (frequency and duration of the interaction) and of quality (in terms of the perceived efficiency of the interactions, and the 'gains' for the language learner/user):

I expected that in APU, many people come from all over the world. But in fact, students are separated ... I don't have the chance to talk to them. Now I can't use the excellent chance in APU.

(Student J)

A variety of cognitive, affective, behavioral and contextual variables was discussed, providing insights into some of the possible sources of students' motivation and inhibitions for communication in English. In brief, the findings suggest that there are some differences between the perceptions of Japanese and international students about the most effective ways English can be acquired or practiced, and the importance of English for finding employment.

However, certain similarities in students' opinions were also observed. Perhaps the most important one is the general feeling of dissatisfaction with the use of English for communication on campus. For many of the subjects interviewed the image of and expectations for APU as an environment providing an opportunity for informal practice did not meet the reality. This has direct implications for the educational institution itself.

Discussion

Issues

Several issues emerged from the study. The interpretation of some of them gives answers to the research questions posed at the beginning of the study. Others can provide the basis for more detailed future research.

The initial research questions are repeated below and will be used as a structure for the discussion:

1. To what extent does the specific multicultural and multilingual environment promote WTC?

The data that was gathered during the study provided both direct and indirect answers to this question. Some of these answers are included in Variable 6 (*Perceived Importance of the L2 Environment*). The data is comprised of opinions which show the students' reflections on L2 use, with emphasis on opinions concerning the role of the environment. Such comments were common, and divided the L2 users in two different categories: students who perceived the university campus as a very 'fruitful' environment for language practice, and thus very effective (these constituted the minority), and students who expressed general dissatisfaction.

2. Is there awareness of the specific characteristics of the language learning environment?

The answer of this question was addressed in Variable 6: *Perceived importance of the L2 environment*, and was unequivocal. Learners have the general opinion that the university's campus offers them the chance for additional practice and acquisition. Whether they realize these opportunities, as was made clear, is a different issue.

3. According to the students, which variables from the affective domain (such as anxiety, motivation, WTC, etc.) are most likely to interfere with interaction?

Some of the affective factors revealed by the students are variables in the model (communication apprehension, motivation), others are subsumed in the L2 Self variable as self-aspects, such as the construct of self-confidence, which in the literature appears as a variable, comprised of communicative apprehension and perceived L2 competence (e.g. Clement 1980).

4. Are there any significant differences between the perceptions of the Japanese and the non-Japanese subjects on the effective use of English for informal communication?

There were some differences displayed between the Japanese and international students in relation to the learning environment deemed most helpful for the acquisition and practice of English. The majority of the Japanese respondents described study abroad or an immersion program as the most effective context for English practice. However, since they displayed quite a few communication-inhibiting factors, they also suggested that it should be an environment which 'pressures' them to speak, or in other words does not provide a choice whether or not to use English.

The data also revealed that the Japanese speakers would prefer an NS as an ideal interlocutor for informal practice.

The present qualitative investigation has found evidence to confirm the results of some qualitative and quantitative studies done in the past concerning the nature of and relationship between some individual differences, which have a crucial impact on L2 use.

In considering WTC, the current study found evidence in support of Yashima (2002) and Yashima et al.'s (2004) findings that 'international posture' predicts WTC and interaction. Some results correspond with Clement et al.'s (2003) findings that frequency and quality of contact influence WTC, through the mediating role of self-confidence.

Previous studies' results about anxiety were also confirmed (Horwitz et al. 1986; Yan and Horwitz 2008), namely that foreign language anxiety and communication apprehension will have a negative effect on the linguistic outcome. Supported also is Daly's (1991) opinion that more apprehensive L2 users will be more reluctant to initiate communication.

However, the current study had several limitations. Firstly, since the sample was an opportunity sample, and the participation was voluntary, it is likely that the students who actually agreed to be interviewed are more or less active language users, and that students exhibiting a high level of communication apprehension, or general lack of interest in speaking English, simply did not take part in the study. This bias is usually overcome when a quantitative framework is used (for example, the use of questionnaires for data collection). However, in the qualitative paradigm, the use of focus group interviews suggest the possibility of providing mechanisms for solving this problem, at least to a certain extent.

Secondly, because this was a small-scale, pilot research study with a holistic focus, it did not provide deep and extensive analysis of all the sets of the investigated variables. This may be overcome in future research in which attention is focused on certain sets of variables only.

Conclusions

The grounded theory model used in this study not only treats learners' differences from the affective and cognitive domain, but also takes into account environmental, and situation-specific differences, which influence an individual's decision on whether to engage in interaction in English. This approach provides a wider perspective, which enables us to see the 'preparation' for L2 communication as a process. This process is taking place both within the learner him- or herself, but is also necessarily influenced by the environment. The study gained such insights because of the seldom-used approach of qualitative interviewing which enabled the views and beliefs of the individuals involved—the students who were users of English as a second/foreign language—to be explored.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

A. QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE UNIVERSITY (APU)

1. What did you think about APU before coming here?
2. What do you think now?
3. Why did you choose to come here?

Alternative questions:

1. How is APU different from the other universities you were applying for, or thinking of applying for?
2. Does APU have any advantages over other universities in Japan? If so, what are they?

B. COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH IN APU

1. How often do you use English outside the classroom?
2. Do you think that there are more and better opportunities for practicing English here (in APU)?

C. MOTIVATION

1. Do you think that acquiring a good level of English will give you an advantage when you are looking for a job later on?
2. Do you like studying languages in general? English?
3. Do you think that people will like you more if you speak a foreign language?
4. Is studying English important for you? Why?

Alternative questions:

1. Do you read books, magazines, or watch movies in English?
2. Do you have any particular language learning goals in front of you (e.g. passing a proficiency test or becoming fluent)?
3. What motivates you to learn and speak English?

D. INHIBITION/ ANXIETY

1. Do you feel anxious/ shy/ worried when you have to speak in English?
2. Do you think that people judge you by your speaking ability?
3. Have there been instances in which, when you are trying to speak, people will get impatient, or will laugh at you?

Alternative Questions:

1. When you are speaking in English are you worried that you will make a mistake?
2. Why is making mistakes so scary?

E. PERSONALITY (INTROVERSION/EXTROVERSION, SELF-CONFIDENCE)

1. Do you like meeting new people?
2. Are you taking part in any extracurricular activities (clubs, circles)?
3. Do you think that you are a good language learner/speaker?
4. Are you confident in your English abilities? Are there cases in which you aren't?

Alternative questions:

1. How do you feel about the fact that you can meet people from various backgrounds here?
2. Do you enjoy speaking English on campus, or do you think that English is imposed to you by the curriculum?

F. PARTICULAR EXPERIENCES

1. Think about an important experience in your life before you came to APU, connected to language learning, which influenced your subsequent way of studying, practicing, etc.?
2. Think about an unpleasant experience (if there is any), when you felt offended, misunderstood, or discriminated against because of your English ability.
3. Have you sometimes thought: "That's it. I give up studying English"? Why?

Alternative questions:

4. Is there a particular event or person in your life, which/who acted as an inspiration, or motivation for learning/practicing English?