Applying the Findings of Attribution Theory-Related Research to the College Foreign Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author first discusses how attributions, in general, play a role in student motivation regarding effort when attempting tasks and in coming to decisions of whether to continue or discontinue those efforts. In particular, the focus is on the context of Japanese EFL learners and their low self-esteem as competent language learners and users. The importance of enabling such students to gain a clear point of reference regarding their own personal progress and improvement, and the implications this has for their self-perception as successful and competent second language learners is explored through an action research project.

INTRODUCTION

As a teacher in the Japanese EFL context I have often found my students to be quite competent and highly motivated in their studies, yet display surprisingly low self esteem regarding themselves as effective language learners. In my own personal experience of many years in Japan I have heard, "I can't speak English." expressed not only by students who are just beginning to study English as a second language, but also from students at the University level who have been in English oral communication classrooms for more than 6 years, and patently do have a reasonably strong oral competency. In fact, even advanced Japanese learners of English, to the teacher's surprise and dismay, often exhibit quite low levels of self-esteem regarding their English oral competency (Brown, 2004). What could have brought about this apparent

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lack of self-confidence? Mathew Reesor (2003) looked at the poor performance of the Japanese in acquiring oral English skills despite massive investment, and highlights several possible reasons, including historically negative attitudes towards Japanese speakers of English, the low status and pay of translators/interpreters, the historical context of English viewed as mainly a means to gather information and the corresponding emphasis on the grammar translation method in schools, and the paucity of training Japanese teachers of English receive in communicative skills pedagogy.

Perhaps due to the above described reasons and other factors, the lack of success in achieving oral competence would appear to have created nationally held, "self critical attitudes commonly seen among Japanese" (Gobel and Mori, 2007,pg.10) in their English spoken ability and competence. By teachers encouraging students to view themselves as more competent learners we may be able to affect how students see themselves as language learners and as Gobel and Mori (2007) comment further that "teachers may be able to affect the future causal attributions of students, influencing the way students view themselves as learners, how they construct notions of success and failure, and even their view of themselves and their progress in learning a language" (pg.12). Also importantly, attitudes towards oneself as a language learner can have a large effect on whether or not we grasp opportunities, such as participation in home stays or study abroad programs that help us to grow and develop as both learners and people (Yashima, 2004).

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Attribution theory (Weiner1986, 1990) has been at the center of growing research looking at the motivational role our perceptions have in determining both our current and future efforts. Attribution theory in applications to education attempts to explain current and future learner motivation and effort by investigating and analyzing learner perceptions about themselves. Before approaching a task, learners ask themselves questions like, "Am I competent and successful at this?" "Am I smart enough to do this?" They then make decisions about how much effort they may expend on tasks based on the answers to these questions. Furthermore, subsequent related causes of success or failure students may attribute to their achievement or lack thereof play an important role in continuing to build self-beliefs. Students will reflect on effort and achievement and ask themselves: "Did I fail because the test was unfair?" "Did I fail because I am not good enough?" Thus, attributions are built up over a history of

successes, partial successes, failures and partial failures as the self tries to make sense of successes and failures in progress through life.

Perceived causes for success or failure can be divided into external to the learner (e.g. luck, and teacher influence) and internal (e.g. ability, and effort). Attribution Theory contends that in general, good learners will try to protect their motivation by explaining away failure in terms of external and uncontrollable factors such as bad luck or poor teaching or internally through their own lack of effort. At the same time, such learners will try to maintain a positive self image by explaining any success as due to their own hard work and ability. By doing so, learners apply a self-enhancement bias, i.e. any success is due to their ability or hard work, and also a self-protective bias, i.e. any failure is due to bad luck or teacher influence. Thus, such learners, able to activate the self-enhancement and self-protective biases effectively, will tend to be more proactive, more persistent and self-directed even in the face of repeated failure. However, on the other hand, poor achievers will often cite reasons for success to external factors such as luck while often seeing their perceived lack of ability as the reason for failure. These learners will expect failure and poor achievement and convince themselves that further effort is useless because they do not believe they have the necessary qualities to succeed.

Culture has also been discussed as playing a strong role in the different attributions people make to their successes and failures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In a typical Western setting, independence and individuality are seen as important attributes, thus a personality in a Western culture strives to maintain autonomy and self-sufficiency by promoting self-enhancement and self-protective mechanisms (Marginson, 2011). However, Asian cultures stress interdependence and group connections, in which the individual is valued for modesty and group orientated identification. Such an individual will be more likely to attribute success to the workings of outside factors such as teacher, community support, and family in order to protect the importance accorded to the group over the individual (Marginson, 2011).

Recent studies (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Gobel & Mori, 2007), in fact, have found strong evidence pointing towards this tendency. These studies find that in collective cultures, such as Japan, where attitudes tend to be more self-critical, and the group is stressed over the individual, the self-enhancement and self-protective bias found in Western cultures is reduced and, instead, Asian learners tend to see their successes as strongly influenced by external factors such as teacher influence, family support, and classroom dynamics while failure is often attributed to a lack of ability and/or effort.

Thus, to help Japanese students develop stronger confidence in their ability, teachers should look at helping students develop a stronger self-enhancement/protective bias regarding their language studies by implementing activities that help students to develop beliefs that they can become effective and competent language users. If students come to see themselves as having the requisite ability to become competent communicators and that hard work will pay off in greater command of spoken Englilsh, they will probably develop a more positive self-image of themselves as second language learners.

With the above theoretical starting point in mind, I carried out a 13-week action research project to see whether students starting to have stronger perceived beliefs in their language competence would in fact encourage students to hold a more positive stance towards oral communication in English.

METHOD

Participants

The lessons were conducted with 30 female intermediate level students majoring in different subject areas at a University in Eastern Japan. Most of the participants have already had six years of EFL instruction in the Japanese school system, and most have participated in short home stay or student exchange programs. Many of the students were also involved in intensive courses aiming at developing the skills to eventually utilize English in a professional setting. Students had classes once a week for a semester of 15 weeks. The class focused on the areas of the development of listening skills in an academic context and conducting competent and effective oral presentation skills.

Activity

The key to the task selection was fulfillment of the following requirements
1. to be something that could be repeated each week, with students easily able to recognize progress.
2. to be linked to the course objectives.
3. to foster student perceptions of autonomy

The activity needed to be short, as in the first requirement, as the course book is

quite comprehensive and consumes a great majority of the lesson time. As one of the course objectives was effective presentation, I decided to focus on eloquence as constituting the main element of the task. Effective presenters are able to speak smoothly and move cohesively and coherently from idea to idea without undue hesitation and stumbling over choice of words, they leave the listener with not only a strong impression of knowledge of the material but a fluent and professional grasp of their topic. Finally, students needed to be able to see progress as mainly due to their own efforts, in order to foster perceptions of autonomy.

Thus, the following task was implemented. Each class was started with a 1 minute ad-lib presentation practice. Students were separated into groups of three and were asked to talk on simple topics nominated by another member of the group. For example student A would nominate a topic such as "summer" and keep track of the time (1 minute). Student B would attempt to talk on the topic of "summer" for a minute. Student C was assigned the role of judge, in that Student C kept track of 4 things:

1. Pauses of more than a second.
2. False starts, and repetition e.g. student says, "I think that…..ah, I think that…….", or "it is good…good,.."
3. Any hesitation devices such as "ahh," *eeeto* (well…)".
4. Any use of Japanese.

Student C would assign 1 point for each instance of any of the above 4. After 1 minute Student C would tell Student A their score, i.e. the number of points counted. Students were encouraged to aim at a score of 2 points, which would suggest a fluid, eloquent and composed flow, that equivalent of a skilled presenter. While topic choice remained constant, each week the length students were required to ad-lib increased by 5 seconds up to a maximum of 1 minute.

Data Collection

Due to the time restraint available for the activity (5 to 10 minutes at the start of class) and the need to monitor a large number of students, I kept track of changing student attitudes by constant real time monitoring of student affect regarding the task i.e. were students becoming more confident and relaxed with the task? Also, records were kept of evolving student improvement or lack there of i.e. whether scores were improving and students were showing an increasing competence at the task. Student attitude towards the task was reflected in answers to a simple question posed by the teacher circulating the classroom, asking, "So, how's it going?" or "How's everything

going?" and carefully noting student answer to the above questions. Records of student affect were noted down by hand during the lesson together with attendance logs. For example, 26 students were present in the first recording of data with the responses of 24 students regarding their feelings towards the task collected (21 students expressing difficulty or lack of confidence regarding the task). In each collection of data the responses of 24 students or over were recorded. I surveyed students in each class at the end of the activity to check ranges of scores and kept track of these general class trends in note form over the 13 weeks (see results).

RESULTS

I conducted three measurements of student affect, in the first week, in the seventh week, and in the thirteenth week. In the first week of the task a recorded 87.6% of students answered in a manner that indicated students perceived the task as difficult or in a way that expressed strong doubts in their ability to be successful at the task. However by class seven and eight, 62.3% of the students were now answering in a more positive manner, answers such as "OK", and "No problem" and were showing a much stronger confidence in their ability to handle the task. By the end of the 13 weeks only 11.1% (28 students present, 27 responses recorded, 3 of which conveyed negative affect regarding the task) of students were expressing difficulty with the task or doubts about their ability, despite the task now being considerably more challenging (longer in time) than at the start (see Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of students expressing negative affect regarding the task

Week 1	Week 7	Week 13
87.6%	62.3%	11.1%

I also monitored changes in scores, though it proved quite difficult to preserve reliability in scoring, as some students conducted the scoring in a very strict manner while others tended to be considerably more lenient. In the first few weeks of the 13-week cycle, students found it very challenging to maintain any fluency on even simple topics, and when questioned by the teacher, reported scores typically between 10 and 15 points, denoting quite broken delivery and poor eloquence in speaking fluently on the nominated topics. However after seven or eight classes a change began

to come over a majority of the students. Most students were becoming able to talk on simple topics with less than 10 reported pauses and /or hesitations etc, and by the 13th week, most students' scores were around six or seven and some students were achieving the goal score of two. Although scores were in part dependent on the severity or leniency of the student conducting the scoring, groups were mixed at random each class and taking into account that even though the length of time required to ad-lib increased over the 13 weeks, scores continued to drop over the 13 weeks, indicating increasing mastery of the task.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

From a situational perspective, learners need pedagogical approaches which match their cultural background and learning style. By providing opportunities for students to concretely experience improvements in competence, EFL teachers in Japan can go someway towards overcoming Japanese students' lack of self-confidence and belief in themselves as a competent language learners by incorporating appropriate classroom tasks. For example, a simple repeated task with a clear goal which provides instant and objective feedback and also allows students to regard themselves as the main contributor to improvement, such as the task discussed in this article, can go a long way in enhancing student perception of success in the foreign language. While there are many effective teaching tools available to the EFL teacher, it is important to consider from a student point of view whether the student is able to clearly identify progress within themselves in relation to the task. Benefits may be readily understood from a teacher viewpoint, but we must approach our choice of classroom activities by also asking ourselves whether students will also be able to readily recognize these benefits.

If we are able to help our students move towards a more positive self-perception, we are likely to find our students more likely to accept opportunities in their language studies to challenge themselves, and approach such challenges with stronger decisiveness, persistence and a positive frame of mind.

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