Social Constraints and Japanese Adult Second Language Learners in the US

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1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) involves both linguistic production and the social role of language, in a balance that has yet to be fully understood. The latter is clearly related to social identity; as Peirce (1993) points out, adult second language learners are more likely to acquire a target language (TL) if they consistently socialize with native speakers, but many adults fail in this area due to the lack of opportunities for such interactions. This partly explains why many American SLA researchers mistakenly focus on individual rather than social-historical variables when analyzing why so many immigrant adults fail to acquire a TL, thus overlooking such social-political issues as unemployment or underemployment, economic downturns, and social mobility (Tollefson, 1991). The question remains: why is it so difficult for adult second language learners to become bilingual in natural settings?

SLA researchers are in agreement that children acquire second languages much faster than adults, primarily due to the effects of maturation (Hakuta, 1986; Krashen, 1983). In addition, many neurologists have suggested that the human ability to learn language decreases
over time. In non-physiological terms, an enormous amount of research has been conducted on how social factors affect SLA. One influential theory, Schumann's (1978) Acculturation Model, suggests that acculturation is the primary causal variable in successful SLA for adult immigrants and foreigners. According to Schumann, the degree of successful SLA for adults is dependent on individual attitudes to acculturate to a new environment. Their attitudes and social behaviors are particularly important elements for assimilating into the target language society. Schumann's work focused on the perspective of adult immigrants, whose primary motivation was economic and not educational. In contrast, many Japanese adults at American colleges and universities experience difficulty interacting with native English speakers in social situations, despite their academic backgrounds and individual motivation to succeed. Even after attaining their American university degrees, many Japanese adults feel stress due to their sustained difficulties with daily social interactions. The purpose of this paper is to analyze their language learning difficulties in terms of three social and psychological factors: inhibition, sociological perspectives, and motivation. The data, which were collected via personal interviews with six Japanese adults who studied English in the US, will be used to support or refute the argument that many non-native speakers studying overseas fail to learn a TL because of a) socio-linguistic demands that require them to use unfamiliar speech styles and non-standard accents in their new environments, and b) a general lack of opportunities to socialize with native speakers. Either factor can have a strong effect on linguistic behavior regardless of how motivated a language learner may be. Signs of failure include low self-esteem, self-blame, and linguistic difficulties made worse by the negative non-verbal behavior they perceive as coming from native speakers (Brockner, 1983).

2. Social and psychological factors affecting adult SLA

The idea that second language (SL) learner motivation and attitude are correlated with achievement, cognitive ability, aptitude, and personality is supported by a good deal of research (see, for example, Krashen & Terell, 1983; Lambert, 1963; and Spolsky, 1969). On the other hand, a number of scholars have used a human development approach to assert that adult SLA is strongly affected by external environmental contexts (Mead, 1954; Peirce, 1993; Schumann, 1978; Scully, 2002; Spolsky, 1969; Vygotsky, 1962). Many of them argue that
interactions with native speakers in familiar, comfortable, and intimate environments constitute a major determinant of adult SLA success (Peirce, 1993; Schumann, 1986; Spolsky, 1969).

Nida (1957) was one of the first to argue that low motivation for second language learning is attributable to cultural and ethnic identity. Lambert (1963) later hypothesized that perceptions of and attitudes toward the TL group can influence the motivation of an English as a Second Language (ESL) learner. According to Schumann’s (1978) acculturation model, TL proficiency is influenced by the social and psychological distance that exists between a minority group and its host society. When this distance is reduced—in other words, when the learning group views itself as being culturally, economically, and politically equal to members of the host society—learners become more motivated to acculturate and acquire the TL. Simply put, acculturation facilitates second language acquisition.

Peirce (1993) argues that Schumann failed to adequately explain in detail how social contexts affect adult immigrant SLA, and points out that even though many adult immigrants lack opportunities to build social relationships with native speakers, many still acquire their TLs—perhaps due to their strong motivation to assimilate. She used Schumann’s own example (an adult immigrant named Alberto) to show that an individual who is highly motivated to assimilate is capable of learning a TL even when the social distance that exists between an immigrant community and host society severely restricts interaction.

In the US, linguistic minorities feel pressure to assimilate both linguistically and culturally in order to achieve social and economic mobility. Historically, immigrants to America have had to give up their native languages and cultures in return for accepting American ideology (Scully, 2002). Learning English has long stood as a social, political, and cultural symbol of Americanization, representing a complex mix of relationships among language, values, and social and cultural identity. There is a tendency for adult immigrants to become isolated because of ethnic and linguistic boundaries, which can deter even the most highly motivated individuals from acquiring a SL and integrating into their host societies (Peirce, 1993; Schumann, 1978).
2.1 Low Self-esteem

A major factor affecting adult SL learners is the combination of low self-esteem and negative self-perceptions based on interactions with native speakers. According to Segalowitz (1976), when non-native speakers perceive that they are speaking in a substandard manner to their interlocutors, they feel uncomfortable. He also observed that non-native speakers were less secure under casual second language conditions compared to more formal situations—the opposite of most native speakers. His explanation for this was that the sociolinguistic demands of informal social situations require non-native speakers to use unfamiliar speech styles. In such situations, adult non-native speakers often lose their senses of self-esteem because of negative non-verbal communication displayed by native speakers. According to Brockner (1983), low self-esteem is correlated with increased self-blame and a strong sense of incompetence in producing the TL.

2.2 Inhibition

Compared with children—who have less need for ego protection—adult non-native speakers perceive severe challenges in conversations with native speakers. The three primary reasons why adult second language learners feel inhibited in interactions with native speakers are:

1. In a new culture that uses an unfamiliar language, it is very difficult for adult second language learners to accept their new identities. This difficulty is made worse when they are treated in a child-like manner by native speakers (e.g., baby-talk, condescending comments, or facial expressions of disapproval). The resulting embarrassment may cause non-native speakers to avoid subsequent opportunities for interaction.

2. Physically, cognitively, and emotionally developed adults tend to get their information from media in their first language, which restricts opportunities to listen to and speak with members of the TL culture. Their cognitive and linguistic self-awareness makes them sensitive to their limitations, thus adding to their sense of discouragement and adding to their desire for isolation (Buring, 1981; Peirce, 1993). At best, they may achieve the ability to translate everything they see, hear, or feel into their native language, which Brockner (1983) and Segalowitz (1976) have identified as self-handicapping behavior.
3. Speaking “good English” is an important value to many Americans. Historically, English has been used as an instrument of political, social, and economic control resulting in social stratification (Wily & Lukes, 1996). This creates a paradox in which opportunities for interactions with native speakers are decreased because of the attitudes of people who believe that immigrants should learn their language. The result is often a “sink or swim” immersion approach to teaching language, based on the assumption that the greater the assimilation of an immigrant into American society, the more that individual will be able to learn English. Non-native speakers in the US are aware of debates over “English Only” legislation and perceive a societal emphasis on “standard” English dialect. This adds to the pressure on adult second language learners to speak “good English” in social situations.

2.3 Sociological perspective

Vygotsky (1962) wrote that human language development is based on socialization experiences, through which adults are affected in various ways (Mead, 1956). If adults have positive experiences communicating with native speakers, they have more opportunities to understand the relationship between their new society and language. Vygotsky also argued that while children’s speech is directly based on the recall of external experiences, adult speech is based on the internalization of social experiences, with behavioral and linguistic changes dependent upon their individual environments. Some support for this assertion comes from Ervin-Tripp (1974), who studied the Japanese wives of American men. She observed that her participants a) changed their language content according to the immediate social situation and b) tended to use past experiences to build new language structures. Two decades later, Peirce (1993) made the claim that adult second language learners who have positive learning and socialization experiences in their new environments tend to improve their TL skills.

Strong cultural factors also come into play. In the West, individuals are viewed as independent, but in Japan they are viewed as interdependent (Cousins, 1989; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Americans tend to act in isolation, appreciate individual differences, and stress the importance of their own needs, while Japanese emphasize harmonious interdependence with others (Cousins, 1989). As a result, Japanese try to feel and think of
how others absorb information and how to help others satisfy their wishes and goals, while Americans are more likely to try to convince others to accept their viewpoints (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For Japanese living in America, these major differences contribute to the difficulties inherent to conversational interactions with native speakers.

For example, in response to the question, “What do you want to eat tonight?” a Japanese will likely respond with “I don’t know” or “Anything,” reflecting a concern for a host’s feelings and desires. An American is much more likely to respond with a specific statement such as “I would like to eat Italian food,” reflecting a sense of responsibility to express clear opinions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In social situations, Japanese adult second language learners with little experience in America feel uncomfortable with what they perceive as self-centered behavior. In return, Americans view recent arrivals from Japan as quiet, shy, and unassertive. Many Japanese adults hesitate to communicate with native speakers because they have been taught since childhood to suppress their feelings and thoughts.

3. Method

3.1 Research questions

1. What social and psychological constraints exist for adult second language learners in natural situations?

2. How are the self-perceptions of second language learners’ oral communicative competencies shaped by reactions they perceive from native speakers in social situations?

Data were collected via three one-hour private interviews with each informant, workplace visits, and frequent telephone conversations (all in Japanese). Each formal interview was tape recorded and transcribed.

3.2 Field observations

The study required analyses of both individual and social relationships in order to accurately interpret field observations and to determine if and how those observations either supported or refuted the primary research questions. Individual case analyses were required in order to understand the social positions of the students and their activities in the research setting. In addition, since each participant had an individual explanation for succeeding or
failing to assimilate into the local community and/or to master the intricate details of the English language and American culture, separate case analyses were required to shed light on the most important aspects of those individual explanations and behaviors within a shared context. When combined with field observations and interviews, these analytical methods helped draw a descriptive picture of how the informants perceived (or continue to perceive) American university life. My main task was to find and focus on the descriptive highlights of my interviews and field observations in order to identify essential points regarding acculturation and language development.

3.3 Participants

The six participants’ data are presented in Table 3.1. The participants were six Japanese adults (two male, four female) between the ages of 28 and 43, all with college degrees from American post-secondary institutions and holding jobs with American companies or universities. Each informant admitted having a major problem with oral English, despite the fact that they lived in the US between five and eight years. Four of the six informants were single; two had graduated with bachelor’s degrees from Japanese universities before earning their master’s degrees in the US, and three had graduated with two-year degrees in Japan before earning their bachelor’s degrees in the US. One spent four full years in the US as an undergraduate student, and one lived with his family in Seattle and spoke Japanese at home. Three had jobs in large American corporations, one was a public high school Japanese language teacher, and two were teaching assistants at a large university. All had started working at their current jobs within three years after graduating from an American post-secondary institution.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Atsuko</th>
<th>Tamako</th>
<th>Makoto</th>
<th>Kazuo</th>
<th>Michiko</th>
<th>Akiho</th>
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Table 3.1. Demographic information for the six informants.
4. Results

All six informants experienced difficulties in daily social interactions as foreign students, and all felt that they had been unequally treated as foreigners because of their cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. However, none expressed a desire to return to Japan, not only because of the opportunities available to them to improve their English skills, but also due to their willingness to accept the overall challenge of assimilating into and living in American society. As I will describe in a later section, they all said that their motivations to learn English had changed over time.

In the next five sections, I will discuss the participants’ responses to the questionnaire items in terms of the major interview categories.

4.1 What motivated you to come to the United States?

All six reported having an interest in American culture that went beyond learning to speak English. Kazuo went against his parents’ wishes to attend a respected Japanese university, partly because he undervalued an education from a private Japanese university and partly because of his interest in American music. He said he had concentrated on studying English as a student in a Japanese junior college before moving to the US. Makoto had received a bachelor’s and master’s degree from Japan’s most prestigious institution of higher learning, Tokyo University, and worked for a Japanese company for several years before moving to the US to study engineering. He reported having an extremely difficult time communicating with native speakers upon his arrival with his family. While taking ESL classes, he occasionally regretted his decision to leave Japan, and sometimes felt depressed when his academic advisor recommended that he continue studying ESL.

Two female informants, Akiho and Michiko, said that their original plans were to study English and to acquire the necessary skills to work at jobs that were unavailable to them in Japan. The two other women, Atsuko and Tamako, came to the US with their husbands, but wanted to further their educations on the belief that their job careers were dependent upon good grades in university-level classes. All six said they had moved to the US with the dream of living there and improving their English skills, but planned to eventually return to Japan.
4.2 What were your initial experiences like studying English? How did you feel when you performed poorly in spoken or written English at your American university?

All six reported having few chances to interact with native speakers at American universities, with most opportunities occurring in the classroom. Tamako specifically mentioned making a special effort to establish friendships in her classes, but still ended up feeling isolated because of her limited linguistic and social skills. All mentioned watching television as a means of acquiring oral English skills, and a tendency to socialize only with Japanese and other Asian students.

Linguistic speed was clearly a concern for all of the participants. When native English speakers spoke to them in “baby talk” or other slow manner of speech, they felt as though they were being treated as children. However, when conversing at a normal speed, all of the informants said that upon their first arrival in the US they were only able to catch some words and were forced to use those words to guess what native speakers were saying. Not wanting to make mistakes, they tried to give the appearance of being good listeners, while avoiding making hasty responses. They eventually became accustomed to the sounds of conversational English from native speakers. Makoto in particular said that he never felt at ease at the conversational speed of most native speakers, although he made considerable improvement in comprehension. His slow spoken English always made him feel uncomfortable in social situations.

Michiko said that doing group work was the most difficult task for non-native speakers in regular university classes, since native speakers failed to compensate for their limited linguistic skills. One culturally based complaint mentioned by several informants was that American students only paid attention to immediate outcomes instead of group consensus and inclusion. In addition, they reported having problems with self-esteem after reading teacher feedback on their research papers and other written assignments, and felt that their ESL instruction had not adequately prepared them for the academic demands they faced.

4.3 Do you have difficulty socializing with native speakers in your company?

After leaving school, the six participants felt that their social situations deteriorated even further, since many of their co-workers overtly treated them as outsiders. Akiho was so
embarrassed about her lack of linguistic competence that she wanted to leave her company, while the others felt that their self-esteem had been reduced because of their Japanese identity. The two male informants said that they never made much of an effort to socialize with their colleagues and co-workers outside of their official duties. Kazuo said he spent his social time with Asian-American friends and occasionally attended parties held by Japanese or other Asian friends.

Two of the six described the intense level of competition they observed among co-workers in their respective companies, and a third said that she felt extremely uncomfortable because of her co-worker's attitudes towards her linguistic competence. Specifically, she complained that her co-workers assumed that she was incapable of understanding American humor; she was unsure whether this assumption was based on cultural differences or linguistic difficulties, but felt that there was some connection between that assumption and the competition she saw among her company's employees. Others said that they felt compelled to accept many jobs that native speakers did not want, leading to a general feeling of inequality and lack of opportunity for promotion.

4.4 Why do you think you have difficulty socializing with native speakers?

Cultural and linguistic differences were viewed by all six participants as major factors affecting their language learning, since they made the sharing of opinions and views about work responsibilities difficult. Kazuo and Akiho also observed that Americans place a high value on competition, self-presentation, and self-promotion, which is very different from the Japanese emphasis on teamwork. Three of the participants did not consider themselves as working in positions of equal importance to those held by native speakers in their companies. On the other hand, Makoto—who has a Ph.D. in engineering—said that his job responsibilities made him independent of his native-speaking colleagues.

4.5 How has your motivation to learn English changed since you came to the US? How long do you intend to stay in the US?

The six participants said they wanted the challenge of working in an American company and of attending American universities, believing that doing so would help their job prospects
in Japan. At the time of our interviews, Akiho said that she was considering leaving the country, and Michiko said she would return to Japan if her applications to graduate school were rejected. She added that she would have felt more comfortable living in her native country, since her life in the US had turned out to be more difficult than anticipated. She felt her students and their parents had displayed racial prejudice towards her. She expressed a desire to earn a Master’s degree, return to Japan, and teach young students about her experiences in the US. Makoto said that his children had reached the point where their English was better than their Japanese, making a return to Japan a difficult proposition; he therefore plans to return once his children become independent. Even though he appeared to be very successful in his job, Kazuo also expressed a desire to eventually return to Japan.

5. Discussion

Regarding the first research question, the six participants expressed concern over the social and psychological constraints they encountered when conversing with native speakers: low self-esteem, inhibition, and problems associated with cultural differences. An explanation for low self-esteem based on poor linguistic performance is found in self-perception theory. The six Japanese students felt uncomfortable in the US due to their general lack of oral English competence, which made it difficult for them to meet what they felt were appropriate social demands.

Perceptions of linguistic incompetence during social and business interactions with members of a TL group can contribute to feelings of low self-esteem and changes in a second language learner’s identity. According to Lambert, such changes may be attributed to pressure exerted by the TL community on the language learner; in the case of adult second language learners, this can result in feelings of low intelligence and low self-confidence in social situations (Segalowitz, 1976). Furthermore, according to Brockner’s (1983) phenomenological analysis, individuals who “[lack] confidence in their own attitudes and behaviors ... are especially apt to yield to other people’s cues for socially appropriate feelings and actions” (p. 129). Adult second language learners often deny their own sense of self-identity in favor of a new identity shaped by the host society.

Another explanation for the social and psychological constraints reported by the
participants can be found in Brown's (1980) inhibition theory of effective domain. Four of
the six reported a tendency towards isolation from native speakers. As university students,
Makoto, Kazuo, Akiho, and Atsuko socialized almost exclusively with other Japanese or
Asians because they felt it was too difficult to make American friends. Michiko specifically
stated that she could not converse with American acquaintances about her personal problems
because of her sense of isolation.

All of these visiting students felt a need to protect their egos by establishing defenses
and maintaining distance from others in their new environment. Even though they had
reached adult levels of psychological, social, and cognitive development before arriving in the
US, their values, beliefs, and personal identities were required to undergo change because of
new linguistic and social demands. Only when adult second language learners begin to accept
their new identities can they feel more comfortable socializing with native English-speaking
individuals.

Another social/psychological constraint that these language learners experienced
entailed the negative racial and linguistic attitudes that Americans commonly display toward
immigrants and foreigners. In social situations, the subjects were keenly aware of their social,
linguistic, and racial dislocation from the mainstream. Finally, the Japanese participants had
to deal with cultural differences between interdependent and independent approaches to social
interactions (Cousins, 1989; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In Japan, interdependent
communication stresses empathy and making behavioral adjustments to accommodate the
needs of others, while the American individualist approach stresses personal ability and
competence in isolation from larger societal and group needs (Cousins, 1989). Brown (1980)
contends that empathy is a major determinant of adult SLA success because of the need to
interact with others in a meaningful way in order to improve linguistic skills.

Ever since she started working for an American company, Akiho has been sensitive to
what she perceives as unequal opportunities for advancement based on the cultural differences
just described. As with many other Japanese, she often found herself unable to engage in the
self-presentation and self-monitoring behavior that Americans are so accustomed to. Clearly,
Japanese immigrants must adjust their identities and become more like their American
counterparts if they want to be accepted by the mainstream.
Spolsky (1969) observed that individual motivation to learn English is correlated with SLA success. The six participants expressed strong motivation to be successful students at American universities, but nevertheless suffered from low self-esteem and workplace isolation brought on by their own avoidance of social situations. Thus, it appears that their achievement motivations shifted from integrative to instrumental during their time in the US, primarily because of their perceptions of linguistic attitudes displayed by native speakers.

6. Conclusion

All six participants had difficulty during social interactions with native English speakers because of such social and psychological constraints as low self-esteem, personal inhibitions, and cultural differences. For the same reasons, their motivations for learning a second language changed from integrative to instrumental. While some adults find it very difficult to accept new identities, they nevertheless tend to acknowledge the cultural, social, and linguistic demands they must address in order to survive in a host society.

Further investigation into the issues discussed in this paper will require a more sophisticated questionnaire to be used with a longer series of in-depth interviews. The list of social, psychological, and emotional variables that influence adult SLA is very long, requiring a series of research projects focusing on individual factors in order to truly understand the psychological constraints and motivations of a particular SLA group.

References


