The Role of Identity in Language Learning

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Introduction

The following reports on the results of a research project aimed at better understanding the nature and degree of identity shift, change and development in learners of English as a Foreign Language in Japan. The social, cultural and linguistic distance between English and Japanese learning and communication contexts tends to create significant differences in learners perspectives and attitudes towards engaging with others. Often this results in positive developments as learners acquire new ways of thinking, new strategies for communicating and an openness to understanding difference or exchanging ideas. However, in many cases, effects can be debilitating as learners grapple with culture or language shock, rejecting the formation of a new identity and becoming introverted and reticent towards communication in English. Whether this type of identity shift is an obstacle or a tool for communication depends greatly on how overtly it is addressed in the learning context and the level of awareness students have of their own meta-linguistic or meta-cultural changes. This type of understanding is essential in providing a solid platform of confidence needed for an overall positive experience and transition to communicative competence.

There have been many studies reporting on the social, psychological, cognitive or affective factors involved in language learning and their subsequent impact on motivation, attitude and overall levels of competence. Kramsch (1993) proposes that learners create a third place identity from which to objectively view and interact with both target and home language cultures. Byram (1997) suggests that for intercultural communication, learners employ a series of awareness developing skills (savoirs) which can be negotiated and transferred between languages. Similarly, Widdowson (1998, 2005) expresses a need for learners to identify with familiar concepts and artifacts in the target culture through authentic material and content, in order to more actively engage with the target language and its speakers. These studies are significant in establishing a need for a better understanding of nonlinguistic variables, however when considering the fundamental concept of identity shift or development, tend to overly focus on the large scale effects of culture shock, motivation or classroom dynamics. Few studies exploring the social and psychological elements affecting language learning have attempted to investigate and consider differences on the individual and interpersonal levels of communication, awareness of differences and subsequent strategies employed to counter or accommodate changing or shifting identities.

Smaller scale studies aiming to isolate and interpret variables of identity development and management on a more inter-personal level include the following. Atay and Ece (2009) surveyed teachers methods and successes in bridging cultural and interpersonal gaps among learners of English as a Foreign Language, in order to determine the extent to which English impacts the construction of socio-cultural identity in Turkey. They concluded that many Turkish teachers construct and employ various identities as a semi-conscious strategy for communicating with and engaging learners. Lane (2009) explored the use of cultural artifacts to construct identities for engaging and motivating learners of minority languages to create a more relevant and visceral connection with the target language. This study found that emotional and personal

ties ("friendships") to the target language community were strong positive influences on language learning. Similarly Kashima (2010) found that building relationships with members of the target language community resulted in a Cognitive Closure which led to a stronger identity, sense of belonging and higher level of communicative competence among Japanese exchange students visiting Australia. Students who were unable to make these cognitive connections failed to completely develop a new identity, were less positive about their experiences and achieved lower levels of communicative competence. Deneme (2010) found that students employed different types of learning strategies based on variables of interpersonal levels of identity. Only learners with a strong identity with the target language group were able to successfully apply higher level social, communicative or affective strategies. Miller (1996) investigated the effects of nationalism and national identity on personal identity and the ability to acquire foreign languages and preserve heritage languages in Catalonia. In both cases having a strong meta-linguistic identity were strong forces influencing language learning, usage and attitude towards communication. In a large scale, ground breaking study, Kachru (1985) proposed three distinct circles of English which directly impact the type and nature of learner's identity, either positively or negatively (inner, outer and expanding circle). These evolve and intersect as learners achieve higher levels of proficiency, confidence and connectivity with the target language community, and consequently affect how their identity develops and shifts to reflect their perceived position or membership in either respective circle. This has strong implications, especially if the focus of linguistic ideals comes from the inner circle or native speaker model. Although a widely accepted model for standard English and a traditional symbol of masterful competence, it is unrealistic and highly unlikely that learners will be able to achieve a native speaker or inner circle proficiency and therefore may be in danger of being lost in the periphery without establishing a communicative identity. For this reason it is essential that learners are encouraged to embrace English as their own and

develop a unique identity and level of communication with which they are secure and comfortable and which is a hybrid of both their own culture and the target language culture. This study will attempt to uncover and elaborate on variables and tendencies which might contribute to the creation and maintenance of multiple identities in learners of English as a foreign language in Japan.

Subjects

Subjects consisted of four separate groups (classes) of first and second year university students. The total number of participants was 128. Of these, 83 were female, 31 were male and 14 were international students, speaking both English and Japanese as a foreign language. All participants had a strong interest in learning English and had been studying for several years. A number of students had spent extensive periods abroad in English speaking countries, however their language proficiency was for the most part uniform. Although language ability was considered important in analyzing identity, for the purpose of this survey, formal language ability, in terms of measurable skills, was not considered directly. Language ability was evaluated solely by using a self-rating scale (see table 1). Although this method is perhaps overly qualitative and subjective in nature, a student's personal perception of their own ability was considered more significant in determining and describing the nature and impact of identity on language learning and confidence in communication. It would be worthwhile if a further study of quantitative data could replicate or otherwise support results of this study. Regardless, whether a student actually was competent in English communication was deemed secondary to whether or not they thought they were competent. As communication styles and attitudes towards communication can often vary based on ability, experience, gender or culture, subjects data was categorized accordingly, female, male, international, low, medium, and high level. However, whether or not such grouping of subjects data is significant is not clear as any conclusion regarding identity and affective factors must, by its

very nature be subjective. Nevertheless gaining insight into students self-awareness in regards to communication anxieties as well as strategies is a crucial first step in determining the multi-faceted nature and impact of identity and its complex role in language acquisition.

Method

Data was recorded from participants using two methods and was conducted at two separate occasions. On the first instance, subjects were given an introduction to the nature and purpose of the study and asked to participate as volunteers. Questionnaires (see appendix) were administered in English and participants were given as much time as necessary for completion. Further advice, explanation and translation was also provided as necessary for lower level subjects in order to prevent misunderstanding of any elements of the questionnaire and to ensure accuracy, reliability,validity and a maximum number of completed responses. As a result all questionnaires were successfully completed and returned without any omissions. Upon submission several students were randomly asked if they would be willing to provide further information and supporting details or explanation by participating in the second phase of the study, which involved and interview. Interviews were conducted the following week and a total of 19 students participated. As this data was intended to be used as supporting comments, responses to interview questions were not correlated with data from questionnaires nor were they categorized by gender. Interview data was recorded, transcribed and organized by perceived language ability (self-rating) and nationality. In all instances subjects were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that all data and personal information would be kept anonymous and confidential. After all data had been collected and recorded, it was categorized by group demographic, scores were averaged for quantitative data and percentages were calculated for qualitative data and yes/no questions (see appendix). It was thought that this type of analysis would be most representative of group tendencies which could also provide insight into individual differences. The data

was then organized into a set of tables (see below) and correlated to determine if any trends, patterns or significant differences became evident.

Results and Discussion

The results indicate that there is indeed a clear relationship between identity formation, positive attitudes towards communication, range and flexibility of communication strategies, openness to diverse communication styles and perceived language proficiency. A significant factor in this causation lies in the degree to which learners feel they will be positively received, understood or accepted by the target language communities. Subjects with higher levels of perceived proficiency were also more likely to view the target language positively, have a heightened awareness of linguistic and cultural differences and use various strategies to accommodate and manage differences in communication styles. High level students also reported a trend toward specific change and raised awareness but were not clear as to exactly what the change incorporated. Conversely lower level students were unsure, or less aware of affective or cognitive changes. Higher level students were more confident in communicating with others and also felt that they could express themselves more clearly in English. These students also did not feel that English was inherently less polite, a tendency more common in lower level students (see table 1).

It is interesting to note that the highest levels of perceived changes and increased level of confidence was indicated by male subjects. This signals that a heighted level of awareness is achieved more rapidly and suddenly for males, however the reason for such a gender based difference is unclear and warrants further research. A further anomaly is apparent in the rating of comfort and awkwardness which decreases in the medium level range and then increases forming a "W" pattern. This is perhaps characteristic of a honeymoon period or introductory euphoria experienced by beginners, soured after hurdles emerge and then regained as ability, confidence and understanding are developed. All groups reported a significant and conscious change

Table 1: Subjects Distribution and Tendency

Subjects	Female (83)			Male (31)			International (14)		
Number	**35**	**30**	**18**	**8**	**12**	**11**	**3**	**6**	**5**
Communication Ability	**Low**	**Med**	**High**	**Low**	**Med**	**High**	**Low**	**Med**	**High**
Self-rating Score	2.46	4.40	6.56	2.63	4.25	6.91	3.33	5.33	8.00
Level of Difference	3.31	3.40	3.44	3.00	3.67	3.64	3.33	3.83	4.60
Passive-Active	2.94	3.87	4.62	2.83	2.58	4.36	2.67	3.33	5.00
Polite-Rude	3.21	3.14	3.00	3.00	2.25	3.20	3.00	2.33	2.00
Shy-Confident	2.26	3.27	3.64	2.43	2.33	4.33	2.00	3.50	4.25
Quiet-Communicative	2.61	3.76	4.35	2.25	2.18	4.44	2.00	3.67	4.33
Private-Public	3.37	3.75	3.86	3.20	3.67	4.11	2.50	4.50	4.50
Reserved-Assertive	2.65	3.25	4.15	2.50	2.43	4.14	2.00	4.25	5.00
Restrained-Free	2.67	4.21	4.46	1.33	3.78	4.38	2.00	4.00	4.50
Comfortable-Awkward	4.29	3.42	3.54	4.00	3.88	3.50	3.67	3.75	4.80
Weak-Strong	2.61	3.30	3.36	2.57	2.67	4.20	2.00	4.33	4.75
Unfriendly-Friendly	3.35	4.58	4.93	2.67	4.40	4.44	3.00	4.50	5.00

Table 2: Occurrence and Frequency of Identity Change

No Change %	Female			Male			International		
	Low	**Med**	**High**	**Low**	**Med**	**High**	**Low**	**Med**	**High**
Passive-Active	11.4%	23.3%	27.8%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	20.0%
Polite-Rude	60.0%	53.3%	38.9%	75.0%	33.3%	9.1%	66.7%	33.3%	40.0%
Shy-Confident	11.4%	13.3%	22.2%	12.5%	0.0%	18.2%	33.3%	0.0%	20.0%
Quiet-Communicative	11.4%	43.3%	5.6%	50.0%	8.3%	18.2%	33.3%	50.0%	40.0%
Private-Public	45.7%	56.7%	22.2%	25.0%	25.0%	18.2%	33.3%	66.7%	20.0%
Reserved-Assertive	42.9%	60.0%	27.8%	50.0%	41.7%	36.4%	33.3%	33.3%	60.0%
Restrained-Free	31.4%	53.3%	27.8%	62.5%	25.0%	27.3%	0.0%	33.3%	20.0%
Comfortable-Awkward	31.4%	36.7%	27.8%	37.5%	33.3%	27.3%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%
Weak-Strong	20.0%	23.3%	22.2%	50.0%	25.0%	54.5%	0.0%	50.0%	20.0%
Unfriendly-Friendly	34.3%	36.7%	22.2%	25.0%	16.7%	18.2%	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%

Table 3: Degree of Identity Change

Degree of Change	Female		Male		International		Level
	Yes	**No**	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**	
Identity Change	62.9%	37.1%	50%	50%	100%	0.0%	Low
Conscious Change	62.9%	37.1%	75%	25%	100%	0.0%	
Identity Change	63.3%	36.7%	50%	50%	83.3%	16.7%	Med
Conscious Change	66.7%	33.3%	92%	8%	83.3%	16.7%	
Identity Change	88.9%	11.1%	64%	36%	80.0%	20.0%	High
Conscious Change	83.3%	16.7%	73%	27%	40.0%	60.0%	

in their identity with the new language. With sharpest changes indicated for medium level male subjects (98%) and high level female subjects (88%). Similar results tend to be more extreme and pronounced among international students however any correlation would be difficult as their identities were related between foreign languages and not with their native language. It would be interesting to explore this relationship further to more accurately determine the extent to which international participants differ from Japanese.

The overall trend which emerges, suggests that identity is indeed a significant factor in language acquisition and tends to have a positive influence as learners feel they are better able to communicate. Although the self-rating scales for this survey are subjective in nature and inconclusive in making any absolute claims, responses and data from interviews supports these results and indicates an active raising of awareness levels as well as a conscious shift and management of identity.

Comments

Lower Level

"My Japanese communication identity is abstract, we speak Japanese indirectly. English is very honest language, we use English directly."

"Japanese I am friendly, in English I am quiet, passive and reserved."

"I tend to be passive about my opinion in Japanese, in English I try to tell my opinion to other people as hard as I can."

"When I use Japanese I am usually passive, when I use English I try to talk to other people positively."

"I always laugh when I talk with friends in Japanese, I often feel nervous when I talk English but I make an effort."

"My English is not good but I try to speak, if Japanese

I'm not hard and it is normal or I don't have identity in English."

"I can be active and talk freely in Japanese, I feel passive in English because my ability is poor."

Intermediate Level

"My Japanese communication identity is more active than my English communication identity." "My English identity is not confident."

"Japanese [identity] is shy and cheerful, English [identity] is positive and active."

"In Japanese I use polite form for older people and slang for friends but in English I don't care."

"In Japanese when I want to tell the opposite opinion I always start with agreement at first. For example I must say indeed...but my opinion. In English I try to show some sort of movement and body language like gestures and facial expressions."

"I can be active and talk freely in Japanese, I feel passive in English because my ability is poor."

"Japanese is ambiguous, people don't use no and can't refuse if they don't want to do something. English is clear, I have specific opinion."

"My Japanese identity is accuracy my English communication identity is friendly."

"I am modest and say sorry a lot when speaking Japanese. In English face and body are important for communication."

Higher Level

"I take care of others when talking Japanese, show my feelings straightly to others in English."

"In Japanese most of time my answer is vague, so it is not clear because I try to care about others. In English

they are clear most of the time because I don't know how to say like that in English."

"In Japanese I have to be polite and kind person who don't open my thinking. When I speak English my voice becomes high and I don't hide my thoughts and feelings."

"In Japanese I speak in a roundabout way, I don't say no directly. In English I speak directly because I don't know well how to speak indirectly. In English there'd is no Keigo, that affects me, I am not conscious of sempai."

"I have too much consideration on my utterance and how my utterance affects other person, guess I am conservative in my communication with Japanese. I can become more open-minded and cheerful person when I use English. I feel in English I have a strength in expressing my ideas more than in Japanese. As a result of that, my utterances and behavior are more active than Japanese."

International Students

Malaysian "I don't have courage [in Japanese] sometimes because there are many things I have to learn how to say."

Chinese "I can't express clearly [in Japanese] sometimes I feel helpless."

Chinese "I am less confident in Japanese because I worry about being a fool, I wish I could communicate more. I am more confident in English and speak louder and faster."

From the student's comments, several factors become apparent. There seems to be a high level of awareness of linguistic differences particularly with regard to communication styles and cultural orientations. Similarly, learners at all levels appear to actively try to accommodate these differences through various strategies. Lower level students, understandably are more constrained by structural elements which tend to have a strong impact on their confidence and subsequent participation in any type of active communication. Intermediate and higher level students demonstrated a conscious awareness of communication styles and culture specific values which are perhaps unique in Japanese culture and do not carry over to English. This is an important realization for communicating effectively as such protocols are usually hidden in the realm of common sense, deep culture and shared values and are not overtly discussed or taught. Examples involving differences in politeness strategies formal or informal communication, relationship building strategies, direct or indirect, public or private are strong cultural values which are hard wired into an individual's identity. Extracting these or turning them off is a very difficult process which in itself demonstrates a superior level of linguistic, cognitive and cultural competence. This study has explored the most basic surface elements of identity formation in language acquisition, however much more comprehensive, wide ranging and multidisciplinary research is needed in order to fully understand this process and its effect on learning and communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion the most significant factors in determining the impact of identity shifts on language competence include awareness of differences and changes, how to convert these into communication strategies and understanding how to shift between cultures and contexts. Of equal importance is the degree of confidence created by having a solid base of language structures, which can be used effectively and actively for the purpose of engaging in meaningful communication and receiving positive feedback. At the early stages of language learning, this seems to have the most significant impact on perspectives and attitudes towards English as a language for communication.

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Appendix

Survey and Interview Questions

How well can you communicate in English?

Very Poor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Excellent	

Does your identity change when you use English or Japanese?	Yes	No

How different are your Japanese and English communication identities?

No difference	Somewhat similar	Don't know	Somewhat different	Very different

Do you try to develop a different identity when using English?	Yes	No

Indicate how your communication style changes when you use English?

				No change				
Passive	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Active
Polite	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Rude
Shy	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Confident
Quiet	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Communicative
Private	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Public
Reserved	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Assertive
Restrained	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Free
Comfortable	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Awkward
Weak	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Strong
Unfriendly	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	Friendly

Interview Questions

What is your Japanese communication identity? (Describe)

What is your English communication identity? (Describe)

What affects your language identity?

Why/how do you think your identity changes?

言語学習においてアイデンティティ（自我同一性）が果たす役割

ライマン・アンドリュー

要約

　以下の調査報告では、どのようなアイデンティティの転換がどの程度起きるのかという視点から、日本の英語学習における変化と発展について述べる。英語や日本語の学習やコミュニケーションにおける、社会的、文化的、そして言語的な違いは、しばしば学習者が他の学習者と協力するという点において価値観や態度の面で大きな相違をもたらすものである。

　しばしばこのような相違は、学習者が新しい考え方や、新しいコミュニケーションの方法、あるいは違いを理解することやアイデアを交換する事に対しての寛大さを身に付ける上で良い結果をもたらす場合もある。しかしながら、多くの場合においてこのような効果は、カルチャーショックや言語的な困難さによって弱められ、また新たなアイデンティティが創造されることへの拒否感を伴い、結果的に英語でのコミュニケーションに対してのためらいや躊躇といった形で表出してしまうのである。
このようなアイデンティティの転換が、障害となるかあるいはコミュニケーションのための手段となるかは、学習の状況においてこのことがどれほど明白に言及されるか、または学習者がメタ言語学やメタ文化的な変化について有している認識の程度に大きく左右される。このような理解は、コミュニケーション力への揺るぎない自信やそれを生みだす前向きな経験、あるいはステップとしてたいへん重要であると云える。