

A Qualitative Examination of the Psychological Factors that Influence English Communication Behavior in Japanese High School Students

Takehiko Ito*

Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, The University of Tokyo

The present study qualitatively examined the following psychological factors which directly influence English communication behavior: confidence in English communication and value of English communication. First, a questionnaire survey was administered to 304 Japanese high school students. Based on the results, subjects were classified into 7 groups, using cluster analysis. Subsequently, a 60-minute semi-structured interview was conducted with selected group members. Students in one group (Group 4) reported that English communication was valuable because it enabled them to interact with foreigners, and that they had become confident in English communication through conversing with native English speakers during their English classes. Subjects in another group (Group 5) indicated that English communication was valuable as it allowed them to establish relationships with foreigners. Finally, a student in a third group (Group 7) stated that English communication was valuable because it enabled him to understand important foreign affairs and concepts.

本研究は、英語コミュニケーション行動に直接影響する心理的要因である、英語コミュニケーションの自信と価値について、質的に検討したものである。まず、304人の日本の高校生に質問紙調査を行い、この調査結果をもとに高校生は7つのクラスターに分けられた。その後、特徴的なクラスターを選び、各クラスターに属する高校生に対して、60分間の半構造化面接が行われた。クラスター4の高校生は、外国人と交流できるという点で英語コミュニケーションに価値を見出し、授業においてネイティブの英語話者と会話をすることで英語コミュニケーションの自信をつけたと回答した。クラスター5の高校生は、外国人との関係を築くことができるという点で英語コミュニケーションに価値を見出していた。クラスター7の学生は、海外の重要な出来事や考え方を知ることができるという点に価値を見出していた。

1. Introduction

The Japanese government has proposed that one of the goals of English education should be to instill a positive communicative attitude among students (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2016). As a result, the psychological factors that influence communicative behavior, such as confidence and learning motivation, have recently been examined within the context of English education. Numerous studies have explored the

*Email: take978@gmail.com

psychological processes that influence second or foreign language communication behavior in Canadian (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998), Japanese (Ito, 2013; Yashima, Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004) and Korean subjects (Lee, 2001). Researchers in Japan have identified several important motivational factors that affect communication behavior in English, including willingness to communicate in English (often cited as WTC), value of English communication, confidence in English communication, confidence in English proficiency, and assigned value (i.e., motivation) for learning English. However, these studies have typically employed a quantitative approach and few have qualitatively examined these psychological factors, despite the fact that such an approach would benefit the development of pedagogical methods and materials for English education. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to qualitatively examine the following psychological factors that directly influence English communication behavior: confidence in English communication and value of English communication.

2. Recent Research

Research on the psychological processes that influence language communication behavior has highlighted WTC as a particularly important factor. WTC is defined as “the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice” (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002), and WTC in one’s first language (L1) has been identified as a primary psychological factor that influences L1 communication behavior (McCroskey, 1992). MacIntyre (1994) constructed a model of the psychological process that governs the frequency of L1 communication, with a central focus on WTC in L1. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) later applied this model to L2 (French) communication in Canada, and examined the relationships between WTC in L2 and the Big Five personality traits, the context of communication, perceived L2 competency, L2 language anxiety, and aspects of the socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985) that pertain to attitudes toward the learning situation, motivation, and integrativeness.

In Japan, studies have also been conducted on the psychological processes that influence English (a foreign language) communication behavior (Ito, 2013; Yashima et al., 2004) in an effort to improve the country’s English education. Such development is especially important in countries that utilize English as a foreign language (often cited as EFL) because foreign language education is able to considerably influence the psychological factors that contribute to English communication, given that students often communicate with native English speakers in the classroom. Yashima et al. (2004) examined the psychological factors that influence WTC in English. Taking into consideration of Dörnyei’s (1990) assertion that

Japanese foreign language learners often hold unclear feelings related to foreign language groups when they do not interact with members of such groups on a daily basis, Yashima et al. (2004) replaced the concept of “integrativeness” (Gardner, 1985) with “international posture” in their model. “International posture” refers to attitudes towards foreign countries and cultures, and is therefore strongly influenced by language education and the media.

Recently, Ito (2013) constructed a new model for use in Japan (Appendix 1), which is rooted in the expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The expectancy-value theory proposes that learners’ motivation is a product of their expectation of task success and subjective task value. If either of these factors is lacking, the learning behavior will not emerge. In this model, he proposed a value variable, “value of English communication,” that also directly influences English communication behavior because previous studies focused on only expectation (i.e., confidence) as a communicative variable. Drawing on Kubo’s (1997) suggestion that there are various motivations for learning English in Japan, Ito (2013) further noted that, in the construct model, it would be appropriate to examine not only international posture but also other aspects of motivation for learning English that could influence communication. He conducted a questionnaire survey among Japanese high school students, and identified the following five values of English: “interaction value,” “learning content value,” “self-respect value,” “practical value,” and “learning situation value.” He examined which of these learning values influenced various communicative factors, and found that the interaction and learning content values had significant paths to several communicative factors.

In addition to quantitative studies on the psychological factors that influence L2 communication behavior, the qualitative aspects of these factors have been studied recently. For example, Yashima, MacIntyre, & Ikeda (2016) examined the relationship between WTC/anxiety and actual communication behavior, focusing on not only quantitative but also qualitative data on these factors, which were collected through semi-structured interviews. According to Feilzer (2010), in-depth interviews should be conducted following surveys in order to explore the concepts in more detail. Furthermore, according to Denscombe (2008), some researchers use mixed methods to improve the accuracy of their data, but others use such an approach to produce a complete picture. Denscombe (2008) insists that mixed methods should be used as a means of avoiding biases related to a single method, to improve study development and subsequent analysis, and as a sampling aid when screening for answers that should be followed up through an interview program. In addition, since psychological factors are likely to develop through interactions between learners, educators, and learning situations (Hiromori, 2006), qualitative examination is useful to help develop

an understanding of the dynamics of these interactions. Thus, the present study used semi-structured interviews to investigate the psychological factors that influence English communication behavior of Japanese learners. A cluster analysis was conducted to select participants, because students who have different psychological tendencies would show different qualitative answers.

3. Objectives of the Present Study

The current investigation was conducted to qualitatively examine the following psychological factors that directly influence English communication behavior: “confidence in English communication” and “value of English communication.” Even though “confidence in English proficiency,” “interaction value,” and “learning content value” indirectly influence behavior, this study focused on the particular factors which directly influence behavior because these factors had a higher predictive power.

4. Method

4.1 Participants

Before conducting the interview, a qualitative questionnaire survey was administered to 304 students of a private high school in Kanagawa prefecture. The majority of these students did not communicate in English on a daily basis. This questionnaire, developed by Ito (2013), assesses confidence in English communication (e.g., I am confident in “voicing my own ideas to a host family in English”; 26 items; $\alpha = .98$), value of English communication (e.g., It is valuable for me to be able to “ask a foreigner something in English at a welcome party”; 26 items; $\alpha = .96$), confidence in English proficiency (e.g., I am confident in “listening to English”; 6 items; $\alpha = .87$), interaction value (e.g., I learn English “for when English speakers address me”; 4 items; $\alpha = .84$) and learning content value (e.g., I learn English “because I am interested in the English language”; 3 items; $\alpha = .86$). Based on the questionnaire results, subjects were classified into 7 groups using cluster analysis (Ward’s method, squared Euclidian distance; Figure 1).

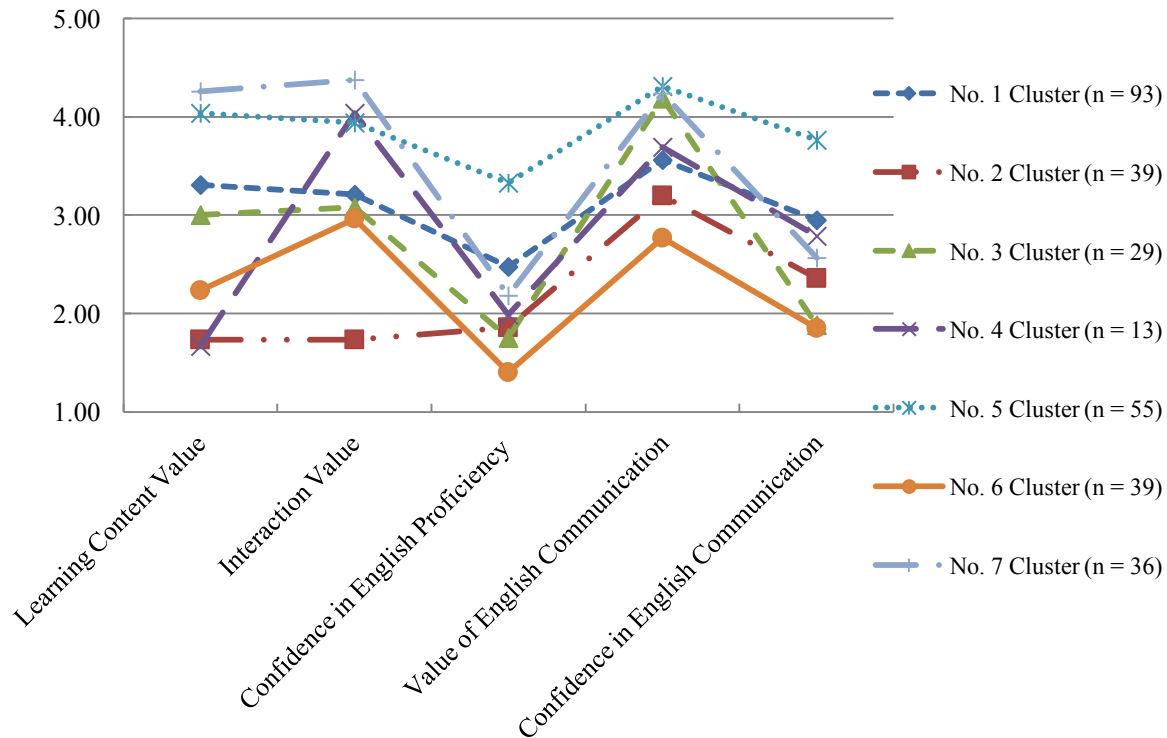


Figure 1. Profiling of the target students by cluster analysis.

Following this analysis, an interview was conducted with students selected from 3 of these groups that exhibited distinct tendencies in specific psychological factors. Thus, 2 students were selected from Group 4, which was characterized by high interaction value and value of English communication relative to the other factors; 2 students from Group 5, which exhibited a relatively high score in every psychological factor; and 1 student from Group 7, which showed a lower level of confidence relative to the other factors. Even though some levels of factors were different, Group 3 and 6 showed tendencies that were similar to those of Group 4, and Group 1 tendencies that were similar to those of Group 5. Therefore, the students of these groups were not selected for the interviews. Group 2 showed a lower level of interaction value compared to other groups, but it was impossible to interview students from this group due to some practical reasons.

4.2 Procedure

A 60-minute semi-structured group interview was conducted within a classroom. The purpose of the interview was explained to all the subjects and the questions asked were based on previously prepared interview sheets. The interviewer sat in front of the students and

recorded their answers using a voice recorder and a notepad. Subjects were thanked for their participation upon completion of the interview.

4.3 Interview Sheet

The interview questions pertained to the following psychological factors which directly influence English communication behavior: confidence in English communication (“Do you have confidence in English communication?”, and “What kind of confidence do you have in your English communication ability?”), value of English communication (“Do you think English communication is valuable?” and “Why do you believe English communication is valuable?”), and the perceived influence and expectations of their English classes (“How have high school or junior high school classes influenced your confidence of English communication?”, “How have high school or junior high school classes influenced your attitudes toward English communication?”, “What do you feel suspicious of English class in Junior or high school about?”, “What do you expect from future English classes?”).

5. Results

Group 4: This group demonstrated a confidence in English communication in terms of “ability to convey thoughts” and “ability to understand what foreigners say.” Group 4 defined the value of English communication as “to be able to interact with foreign students” and “to understand foreigners’ thoughts and cultural background.” Subjects in Group 4 believed that the classroom environment had improved their confidence in their English communication abilities due to the opportunities to directly converse with English speakers. Furthermore, they expected receiving an increased amount of such opportunities in future classes.

The two students in Group 4 exhibited a high interaction value in the quantitative survey. Qualitative analysis of their psychological factors revealed that these students believed that English communication is valuable as it makes meaningful interaction with foreigners possible. In addition, these subjects expected more opportunities to interact with foreigners during future English classes. These characteristics may explain why these students scored a higher interaction value than students in other groups did, and therefore, it will be necessary to provide this group of students with more opportunities to communicate with native English speakers. Since the value of English communication is strongly related to confidence (Ito, 2013), activities aimed at increasing value would also enhance English communication confidence within this group.

Group 5: Subjects in Group 5 reported confidence in English communication in terms of the “ability to understand what foreigners say” and the “ability to communicate effectively with foreigners.” This group stated that their English communication was valuable as it

enabled them “to make foreign friends” and “to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds.” Group 5 did not believe that English classes had improved their English communication confidence, as they believed there to be minimal opportunities to converse with foreigners and an excessive emphasis on grammar. However, they anticipated more opportunities to communicate with English speakers during future classes.

The two students from Group 5, who participated in the interview, tended to score highly on every psychological factor measured in the quantitative survey. These subjects were confident in their English communication skills and they reported that they could effectively communicate with English speakers. However, they believed that the English classes did not increase their English communication confidence. One explanation for this may be that these students have the opportunity to converse with English speakers outside the classroom and to consequently improve their skills through this channel.

Group 7: The subject in Group 7, who participated in the interview, had high confidence in English communication in terms of the “ability to convey one’s thoughts through gestures.” This subject believed that English communication is valuable because it enabled him “to understand important foreign affairs and concepts.” Additionally, the subject reported that observing other students who were exceptionally proficient in English pronunciation during classes had diminished his own confidence. He expected to witness a greater emphasis on grammar and reading in future English classes.

This subject showed a lower level of confidence relative to the other factors on the questionnaire. This student indicated during the interview that his confidence had diminished after observing other students in the English class who were proficient in pronunciation. Moreover, he stated that he expected a greater emphasis to be placed on grammar and reading in future classes. This kind of student is likely to try to avoid communicating with English speakers, and classroom exposure may decrease their communication confidence.

6. Discussion

In this study, Groups 1, 2, 3, 6 were not focused on in the interviews because of similar tendencies and some practical reasons, but to make my discussion convincing, the interview data of these groups should be examined. Furthermore, as a future study, the three “value” factors in Figure 1 need to be combined, followed by the two “confidence” factors, to create clear picture of psychological tendencies.

In the present study, a group interview was conducted, but it is possible to say that the data may have been influenced by group dynamics. Therefore, in future research, the present data should be compared with individual interview data. Furthermore, 5 participants were

interviewed this time, but to make the findings more generalizable, more participants should be interviewed in future studies.

The qualitative analysis of relevant psychological factors performed in the present study provides some suggestions for improvement in the interaction dynamics between learners, educators, and the learning environment in Japan. However, the findings are not applicable immediately to the actual classroom because the psychological factors are not stable and are influenced by the group dynamics between teachers and students. Considering this limitation, it is necessary to provide students with the opportunity to communicate effectively with English speakers during classes.

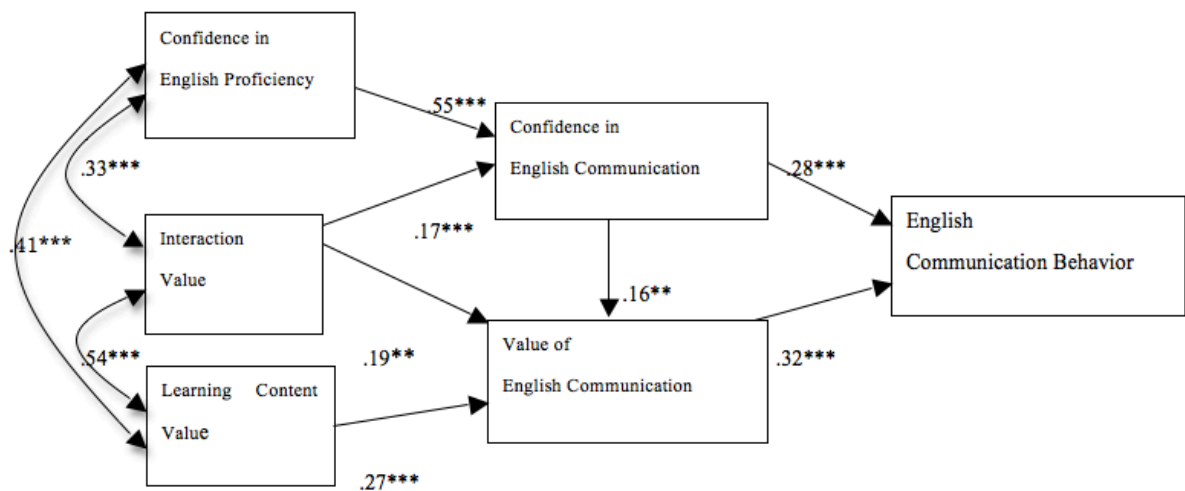
A greater understanding of the psychological factors would result in the development of more effective teaching methodologies and instructional materials for English communication education in Japan. Such an improvement would be undoubtedly advantageous, as the necessity for English communication is increasing, despite the fact that English continues to be a foreign language in Japan.

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Appendix



$$\chi^2(5) = 6.11, p = .30, GFI = .99, AGFI = .97, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .03$$

(* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$)

Appendix 1. The Psychological Model of English Communication among Japanese Learners (Ito, 2013)