9. WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

The Effect of Conference Participation on Students’ L2 Apprehension

INTRODUCTION

Communication Apprehension in Speaking English

In a global society, English has become the international lingua franca and is regarded as a necessary language for being a member of the international community (Jenkins, 2007). Even in such a milieu, the high degree of communication apprehension has generated a lower level of willingness to communicate and consequently has impeded communicative competence among Japanese learners of English (Matsuoka, 2009).

Communication apprehension, the mental construct defined as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977, 78), has been identified as the strongest factor in reducing the level of willingness to communicate among Japanese college students (Matsuoka, 2009). Communication apprehension is also identified as a socio-psychological phenomenon called social anxiety. People experience this social anxiety when speaking in front of others, as Young (1991) has also observed. Accordingly, communication apprehension is hypothesized to be a primary reason for avoidance or disruption of communication.

In cross-cultural apprehension research (Klopf, 1984), Japanese were shown to be significantly more apprehensive than all other groups in the Pacific basin—Americans, Australians, Koreans, Micronesian, Chinese, and Filipinos. Although this study was based on the quantitative results from McCroskey’s questionnaire, the high levels of communication apprehension may be regarded as one of the main causes for lowering communicative competence in English. Therefore, efforts to reduce communication apprehension might enhance communication behavior in English. Recently a growing number of Japanese nursing professionals work overseas as a part of international health aid, and an increasing number of foreign migrants live in Japan (IMCJ, 2004). Because nursing students participating in the present study are eager to be active overseas as well as to work with foreign patients in Japan in their future careers, it seems crucial to find ways in which communication apprehension has impeded them from effective communication. In fact, when the author visited Cambodia for an international conference, the hotel staff, many

S. Horiguchi et al. (Eds.), Foreign Language Education in Japan, 133–145. © 2015 Sense Publishers. All rights reserved.
of whom speak English after only one year of study, asked why Japanese cannot speak English “even though they are smart enough to develop advanced technical devices.” Being aware that these remarks are mainly from an essentialist viewpoint formed by stereotypical, fixed perceptions, the author explained the possible social attitudes leading to their low communication competence, adding that there are many exceptional cases.

Some studies (McCrosky, Gudykunst, & Nishide, 1984), on the other hand, reveal that Japanese learners of English project high communication apprehension not only in English but also in their mother tongue, which might be caused by social factors. Similarly, Berger and McCroskey (2004) reported that a great number of pharmacy students have high communication apprehension, and the program developed for reducing their high communication apprehension turned out to be effective.

In this study, borrowing a content analysis approach for convenience, meaningful codes or units were elicited from the data composed of the participants’ lived experiences (Brown, Dewey, Martinsen, & Baker, 2011) and the codes were categorized into concepts. These categorized concepts consisting of codes or units may explain the ways in which Japanese learners have built their sense of self. The focal point of this study is to find out the way in which the experiences of being interns at an international conference were successful in reducing the levels of communication apprehension of serious learners of English.

METHODS

Participants

Since the educational mission of the college includes training nurses to work globally, a large number of students are motivated in improving their English communication skills and they seek possible opportunities involving any activities using English. From the more than 400 students majoring in nursing at the national college, nine individuals volunteered to help at the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) international conference as interns during three days in November 2008. Although the JALT international conference was held in Tokyo, seventy to eighty participants were native English speakers, and the participants in this study were expected to be exposed to an English-speaking environment and to use English during the JALT international conference sessions. Five participants were females and four males. Five of them (three female; two male) were third-year students whose ages ranged from 20 to 21; four of them (two female; two male) were first-year students whose ages ranged from 18 to 19. The average age was 19.67.

Four participants out of five third-year students had previously volunteered to work as interns at the same JALT international conference in 2007, and so they knew more or less what they were expected to do. One first-year female student was a returnee who had lived in the U.K. for two years while her father conducted his research in dentistry; the other first-year female student was not a returnee, but her