

A Preliminary Study on the Relationship between Tolerance of Ambiguity and Communicative Competence

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Abstract

This article reports the results of a preliminary study on tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition. The subjects for the research project were all perspective ESL instructors and after in-depth interviews which assessed communicative competence were administered Ely's (1995) tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition scale. The results of the study did not show a general preference for either high or low tolerance of ambiguity. The data, however, did show an acute need for learning strategy instruction and overall teacher training. Furthermore, a relationship between travel to an English speaking country and communicative competence emerged that could affect tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition.

Introduction

English education in Japan will undergo major revisions in the year 2002. Students who are currently enrolled in English Departments of the Faculty of Education will become the teachers involved in instigating the new Ministry of Education's Course of Study. Are these students being adequately prepared for this challenge?

A shift from the grammar translation method of English education to a more communicative-based approach to English is said to be among the revisions planned. But national requirements for a teaching certificate still "do not emphasize teaching methods, practice teaching or performance in English" (Kitao & Kitao, 1995, p. 12). How then are teachers to become successful in teaching communicative competence?

Research suggests that there is a correlation between tolerance of ambiguity and a willingness to take risks as well as being more receptive to change (McLain, 1993). Specifically in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, a low tolerance for ambiguity may seriously hinder the student from: "(1) learning individual linguistic elements, (2) practicing language learning skills; and (3) adopting those skills as permanent strategies" (Ely, 1995, p. 88). This paper will look at the relationship between communicative competence of prospective ESL teachers and tolerance of ambiguity.

Literature Review

Intercultural Nature of the Research

Sugawara and Peterson (1994) state that communication “patterns are culturally variable and, in order to learn or teach communicative competence in a second language, one must be sensitive to the variations in those patterns” (p. 19). Clancy (1990) further adds that “Investigations of communicative competence, whether in a first or a second language, need to consider the cultural values and patterns imparted through interaction” (p. 33). Hymes (1970), who is credited with the theory of communicative competence, states that “competence is dependent upon both (tacit) *knowledge* and (ability for) *use*” (p. 19). Haslett (1989) clarifies that “when establishing standards of communicative competence, one assumes that an individual is ‘playing by the rules’ in his or her given cultural milieu” (p. 30). These arguments clearly show that the study of ESL for a Japanese student will be an intercultural experience as the student is expected to perform not only a linguistic function but a cross-cultural adoption of communication patterns as well.

Testing of Communicative Competence

Many researchers state the complications involved in testing communicative competence. Haslett (1989) shows that while there are general stages in language acquisition, “no comparable general stages of *communicative development* can be detailed” (p. 25). In preparing and administering a test of communicative competence Kitao and Kitao (1996) point out that “there is an almost inevitable loss of reliability as a result of the loss of control in a communicative testing situation” (*The Internet TESL Journal*, [On-line]). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, students were not given a test for communicative competence in English. Instead, students were asked through in-depth interviews for a self-assessment of communicative competence.

Classroom applications of communicative competence

Yashiro (1988) states that “it is only recently that FL [foreign language] is being taught purely as an instrument of communication. The teaching model securely remains native English” (p. 8). In Japan, students of English are expected to perform at near native levels of pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. This previously was accomplished through drill work or what Gatbonton (1988) has named automatization. With the dawn of the communicative approach, automatization has been considered incompatible with genuine conversation. Gatbonton goes on to question what indeed is the methodology of the communicative approach.

Krasnick (1988) believes that there is “an emphasis on productive skills in the

communicative competence-oriented ESL curriculum” (p. 52) which aids the student in establishing the differences between sensitivity and awareness. It will be extremely difficult for a non-native ESL teacher to establish a curriculum based on only a vague outline of methodology unless the teacher is extremely confident in his/her own communicative ability.

Method

Sample

The entire population of junior and senior University students as well as the students in the Graduate program of the English Department, Faculty of Education of Iwate University were requested to participate in this study. Of the nine juniors, five were taking a class taught by the researcher for academic credit and therefore were not included in this study. The remaining four juniors all participated. Of the nine seniors, only two were on campus and available to participate. Of the five graduate students, four consented to participate and one recent graduate also was included in the study for a total of eleven students. Eight students were male and three female. All eleven students had participated in a student teaching experience in a junior high school.

Procedures

All eleven students participated in an in-depth interview conducted in Japanese. The rationale behind using the students native language for the interview was to allow students to express their feelings on communicative competency in the second language without the need to worry about linguistic ability. Specific questions regarding overseas experience and/or travel, and from what age students had exposure to a native English speaker (NES) as an instructor were asked to obtain background information.

Information concerning individual impressions of communicative competence was gathered by asking students for a self-assessment of their English ability. Participants were also asked to identify a specific linguistic skill in which they felt inadequate and the learning strategy they would employ in order to become more proficient in that area.

All eleven of the respondents are future English teachers. Therefore, they were asked to briefly state their philosophy on teaching English and to assess if their university program of study had adequately prepared them for their future profession.

Due to the interpretive nature of the collection of data, students were also asked to complete a questionnaire which measures tolerance of ambiguity as a cognitive variable in second language acquisition. The scale, which was developed by Ely (1995, p. 216)

consists of twelve sentences written in English and can be understood by the university students at their current level of English. For instance one statement reads, “When I’m speaking in English, I feel uncomfortable if I can’t communicate my idea clearly”. The only alteration made to the original format of the questionnaire was the substitution of pictorial symbols for the responses Strongly agree (SA =☉), Agree (A =○), Disagree (D =△) and Strongly disagree (SD =X). These symbols, commonly used in Japan, were considered to be more culturally appropriate than the written English abbreviations. Any questions as to the meaning of a specific word or phrase in the questionnaire was answered in Japanese by the researcher at that time.

Results

Background Information

Eight of the eleven students had been abroad and three had no overseas experience. The length of time spent abroad ranged from a four day trip to three years. The purpose of the overseas travel ranged from a ski vacation to receiving a Master’s Degree in Sociolinguistics.

Of the eleven students, four had an NES as an instructor for the first time in university. Six students had occasional instruction from an NES who served as an Assistant English Teacher (AET) in their junior high school. Only one of these students continued to have an AET throughout high school. The number of classes instructed was reduced to one or two a year. One student did not have any actual classes with an NES in high school but participated in the High school English club which was attended by an NES. Therefore, all eleven students had exposure to an NES as an English instructor.

Communicative Competence

In their self-assessment of communicative competence in English, nine students could easily recall a time when they felt competent in English. All eight students with overseas experience cited a specific incident that took place abroad. Only one student experienced a feeling of communicative competence in the ESL classroom. The remaining two students could not recall a time they felt competent in English.

Students were asked to identify when they felt least competent in English. Three students referred to experiences that occurred while listening. Two of these students cited that they felt unable to understand a movie in English and one student felt unable to understand the teacher’s spoken English. Six students felt the greatest sense of frustration when speaking. They clearly felt that the inability to express what they wanted to say

hindered communicative competence. One student felt least competent in reading and expressed an inability to understand written English. Another student stressed that an initial positive feeling of communicative competence in English faded as concentration waned.

The majority of students identified speaking in English as the specific linguistic skill in which they needed the most improvement. For these eight students, four attributed this inability to communicate to poor pronunciation, two students to a lack of sufficient vocabulary, and two to a lack of knowing communication patterns in English.

The remaining three students had varied responses as to which linguistic skill they needed to develop. One student cited listening and another composition/writing. One student cited a concern with being able to attend to a variety of student levels in the classroom in place of a specific linguistic skill which needed development.

Only one student could name a specific learning strategy to overcome the area in which they felt most deficient. The student who answered composition felt improvement was possible through extensive reading and writing. The remaining ten students felt regardless of the area that needed improvement, that the best learning strategy was through speaking with an NES.

English Education

All eleven students had completed a student teaching experience in a junior high school English classroom setting. As future teachers of English, they were asked to make a brief statement as to their philosophy on the teaching of English.

Six students expressed a desire to teach English from a conversational approach where students would not feel embarrassed to speak. Other responses were to teach using: (1) games, (2) the aural approach, (3) English you can *use* not English you can *learn* and (4) goals that the students have set for themselves.

The conclusion of the in-depth interview asked students to evaluate the level of English instruction they had received. Only one student expressed satisfaction. This was accredited to three years of study in a Master's Program in the U.S. The remaining ten students felt inadequately prepared for a career in teaching English.

Specifically, five students felt especially lacking in communicative competence. One of these students also felt equally lacking in writing skills. One student felt that not enough attention had been given to vocabulary. Another student did not feel adequately prepared in any area. Two students felt that their lack of personal effort accounted for the dissatisfaction in their study of English. One student refrained from answering.

Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale for Second Language Acquisition

The scale for tolerance of ambiguity for second language acquisition runs between 12 and 48 points with 12 being the most tolerant of ambiguity and 48 being the least tolerant of ambiguity in learning a second language. The total score is derived from the following numerical scale: for each response of strongly agree—four points; agree—three points; disagree—two points and strongly disagree—one point. The 12 questions are stated in the negative, such as, “I don’t like the feeling that my English pronunciation is not quite correct”. Thus a response of strongly agree, would receive four points and show a lesser tolerance of ambiguity in learning the second language.

The average score was 29.54 for the 11 students which is the mid-point of the scale. Thus, students did not show a collective preference for either a higher or lower tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition.

Looking at the scores individually, one student had 40 points showing a very low tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition. Six students had between 31-39 points. Three students had 24-27 points and two students had 22 points. Four of the students had not marked any response strongly agree. One student had not marked any response disagree. One student had not marked any response strongly disagree and one student had not marked any response either disagree or strongly disagree.

Discussion

The research found that the students interviewed did not collectively show a preference for either a higher or lower tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition. When the findings were looked at individually, there was a definite relationship between an overseas experience and a higher tolerance of ambiguity.

Of the four students who scored 25 points or less, reflecting a higher tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition, all had either spent a significant amount of time abroad or had a profound experience during their stay in a foreign country. This illustrates Haslett’s (1989) statement that “communication and culture are simultaneously acquired and mutually dependent. In particular, sociocultural knowledge provides the basis for message interpretation” (p. 31). By experiencing English in context, students were able to become more tolerant of ambiguity in second language learning and develop their communicative competence accordingly.

Of the six students who scored above 31 points, three had no experience abroad. In the in-depth interview, two of these three students also could not recall a time when they

felt competent in communicating in English. The remaining three students had overseas experiences ranging from four days to one week. Regardless of the amount of time abroad, in the in-depth interview each of these students could recall a time when they felt communicatively competent in English. It seems clear that an experience abroad leads to a feeling of communicative competence in English. It also appears that the longer the experience overseas, the greater the increase in tolerance of ambiguity in learning the second language.

For many Japanese students, there is little to no contact with non-Japanese prior to an overseas experience. While some students have exposure to an NES as an instructor prior to university, the actual amount of time for personal contact is limited due to large class size. In addition, if the NES only comes to class once or twice a year it is questionable as to what lasting influence this contact may have for the student.

In addition, due to the homogenous nature of the ESL classroom in Japan, students rarely are in a position to explain or defend a belief unique to their own culture. Kraemer (1975) believes that "since [cultural] influences are shared to some extent by most people with whom one ordinarily comes into contact, there is nothing in the reaction of others to draw one's attention to them" (p. 14). Can it be said that this vast amount of shared cultural knowledge in the ESL classroom in Japan actually hinders communicative competence?

After fifteen years of teaching in rural Japan, I have access to the vast amount of shared culture that my students bring into the ESL classroom. For example, my university students were doing a role play exercise in which a man's son had been caught shoplifting. The student in that role was to collect advice from his fellow students and select the most appropriate choice of action. After completing the assignment, I called on this young man and asked what he was going to do about his errant son. He responded with complete confidence, and in a grammatically correct sentence, "I would take a bath with him". Knowing the Japanese custom of communal bathing allowed me to understand his answer. He would take a bath with his son and thus create an atmosphere where they could talk openly without any barriers. But if I had not had prior knowledge of this information, his response would have resulted in my labeling him as a class clown. I can not imagine what response he would have gotten in a multi-cultural classroom.

Hymes (1970) argument for communicative competence states that "the goal of a broad theory of competence can be said to be to show the ways in which the systemically possible, the feasible, and the appropriate are linked to produce and interpret actually occurring cultural behavior" (pp. 23-24). Students of ESL in Japan do learn sentences that

are feasible, systemically possible and grammatically correct. Unfortunately, the homogeneous affiliation of the student body provides no reaction as to what is culturally appropriate when speaking in English.

A student who has participated in an overseas experience will encounter individuals with whom he or she does not share a vast amount of cultural knowledge. In such a situation, for the first time, the Japanese student of ESL will receive a reaction from the listener which indicates that the communication has not been understood. This will require that the Japanese student reiterate or use more concrete examples in order to establish communication. Once communication has been established, a feeling of communicative competence emerges. This positive experience seems to result in a higher tolerance for ambiguity in second language acquisition.

A relationship between successful communication skills and willingness to take risks and implement change provides support to McLain(1993). While it is desirable for students of a foreign language to be able to have an overseas experience, it is not a realistic goal. Stauble (1980) states that “the degree to which second language learners succeed in socially and psychologically adapting or acculturating to the TLG [target language group] will determine their level of success in learning the target language” (p. 44). Due to the aforementioned homogeneity of the Japanese ESL classroom, how will the student receive adequate exposure to the TLG?

It also appears from the research that Japanese ESL students are not receiving adequate instruction in learning strategies. Only one student could name a specific learning strategy in relationship to an area that needed improvement. For the remaining students regardless of the deficiency, the learning strategy was to speak with an NES. While speaking with an NES is certainly advantageous, it is not a cure-all for learning ESL.

A more holistic approach to language learning seems in order since “linguistic competency has not traditionally concerned itself with the cultural aspect of communicative competency” (Sugawara & Peterson, 1994, p. 4). Students could increase linguistic competence by learning to communicate about cultural beliefs and customs unique to Japan. Learning strategies could be included more specifically in the class curriculum. An introduction of intercultural communication skills in the language classroom would nurture cultural self-awareness, specifically as it relates to communicational behavioral patterns. Through such an approach, Japanese students would be taught self-empowerment, and in addition to learning a second language, would receive valuable intercultural skills.

Conclusion

Students with a low tolerance for ambiguity in second language acquisition may overcome this disadvantage through increasing communicative competence. Specifically for the prospective Japanese ESL teacher, the relationship between tolerance of ambiguity and communicative competence could have a significant role in instigating change and risk taking in the field of English education. By introducing a more holistic approach to language learning, the negative effects of a homogeneous ESL classroom in Japan can be utilized as a unified foundation for further studies in cultural self-awareness.

In this sample, the Japanese students did not show a collective preference for either a high or low tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition. A relationship between travel abroad and communicative competence did emerge, however, and appears to have an effect on TOA. Moreover, the study illustrated a decisive need for learning strategy instruction for perspective EFL teachers. Further research using a Japanese translation of the Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale on a larger population of students is currently being conducted to examine these issues and to explore the possible implications of TOA in the Japanese ESL university classroom.

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