A Study of the Psychological Dimension of
Communicative Competence*

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Abstract

    This article attempts to bring to your attention the psychological dimension of communicative competence. First, it points out psychological problems of Japanese learners of English, and suggests the limitation of the present concepts of communicative competence; either the grammatical or the social dimension of communicative competence cannot solve the psychological problems of Japanese English learners. In order to feel comfortable when using English, Japanese must overcome problems like obsession of correct English, and an irrational belief in American and British English, which have resulted in inferiority feelings, discouraged and displeased students and distorted personality of Japanese English learners. Next, this article questions the validity of traditional language use. It contends that conventional ways of using language, reflecting the hierarchical structure of human relationships, are the real cause of the psychological problems. It maintains that English teachers must use democratically appropriate language so that the medium of instruction can help English learners overcome psychological difficulties. Three elements of the ability to use democratically appropriate language are discussed: equality, empathy and encouragement. These elements are found to be important in effective human relationships by psychologists.

Limitation of communicative competence

    Japanese learners of English are very motivated to learn English, but find themselves in a dilemma. They want to be able to express themselves in English freely, but they are not willing to speak up in conversation class. How many times have English teachers said to colleagues, "My students always look down when I ask a question!" There are probably many reasons why students are not learning communications skills in English.

One reason for this dilemma is because of the limitation of the concept of linguistic competence. Chomsky (1965) articulated two concepts: linguistic competence and performance. Linguistic competence means the native speaker's innate ability to produce grammatical sentences of a language, and linguistic performance refers to the actual use of language.

Supported by this conceptualization, the English language education in Japan continued to aim at giving linguistic knowledge. English teachers in Japan used the grammar-translation approach to teach grammar, phonology, and vocabulary. They assumed that a student was able to use a foreign language if he knew the system of the language. However, it was not so as we all know.

In opposition to Chomsky's concepts, Hymes (1972) pointed out the social aspect of language, inventing a term of "communicative competence." Since Hymes, social linguists have found that even though students were taught correct phonology, grammar, and vocabulary of a foreign language, they were not able to use the language. Students should be taught communicative language abilities. Thus, the concept of communicative competence provided the foundation of the communicative approach that aimed at developing language abilities appropriate for use in society.

Since then foreign language education has been changing its emphasis from grammatical knowledge of language to social knowledge of language (Johnson, 1995) Now, conversation skills, acceptable topics, roles of participants, shared information, problem solving strategies, behavioral patterns, manners of compliments, expressions of apology, contexts of utterance, etc. have been incorporated into foreign language education whose main purpose had been teaching purely linguistic knowledge, such as vocabulary, phonology and grammar (Marcus & Slansky, 1994). The concept of communicative competence is further developed by Canale and Swain (1980) to mean grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Thus, the ideas of communicative competence, both linguistic and social, are applied to English language education.

In spite of the change in the teaching method and its ground concepts, Japanese learners of English are not able to learn how to communicate effectively in English. English class generally starts with a teacher's monologue and ends with silence of students. There is heavy pressure that suppresses students' willingness to speak up. Although students do have questions and opinions, they never take a risk of raising their hands to express themselves. Even well educated Japanese who speak good English are nervous in front of native speakers of English. It seems that Hymes' concept of communicative competence does not solve such a case, because inability of Japanese to express in English is psychological. Japanese suffer from obsession of using correct English, unrealistic belief in American and British

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English, low-esteem about their ability and distorted psychological make-up.

In order to tackle the real issue of the problem, we need to reconsider what kind of ability is needed for Japanese to perform effective communication in English.

The purpose of this article is to explore the psychological dimension of communicative competence. To that end, first I will critically review English education in Japan, revealing its subconscious goal and consequences. Then I will propose a new concept of communicative competence, that is an ability to use democratically appropriate language as a solution for psychological difficulties that arise when learning a foreign language.

Treatment of American and British English as the model

Treatment of American and British English as correct English is the popular English language education policy in Japan (Nakajima, 1994). Most English teachers in Japan make various kinds of efforts to teach "correct English" in "correct situations" through approximately eight years of English teaching from middle school to university. Phonology emphasizes imitation of correct pronunciation, correct stress and correct intonation of standard English. Textbooks of English grammar deal with drills of word inflection, prepositions, idioms, and so on which are accepted in the United States and England. Most dictionaries of English cover expressions of only American and British English. Most social linguists too are interested in investigating social rules when English is used in various situations in the Unites States and England. Their efforts are made in order to develop students' communicative competence, both linguistically and socially.

By looking at how Japanese society treats American and British English, it can be said that Japanese are obsessed with American and British English. The mainstream idea that American and British English is correct is well reflected in the society. For example, many institutions teaching English prefer hiring native speakers of English who speak American or British English. Although people from India, Pakistan, and Philippines are native speakers of English, they are often excluded from such employment. Also, Japanese English students tend to consider American and British English accents "beautiful," while other English varieties' accents "ugly." Taking mass media for example, recent FM radio stations broadcast "real English" (Marha and Yashiro, 1991, p.23) spoken by native or bilingual DJ's with American or British accents. According to Haarmann (1984) who surveyed Japanese TV commercials, TV commercials that present "ideals" use American and British English to give a sense of luxury and high life.

Irrational belief about English

Japanese belief that American and British English is only the correct English does not reflect reality. Thanks to studies of social linguists, varieties of English have been recognized as rule governed systems rather than wrong use of English. Take Black English as an example. Black English was regarded as a "random collection of mistakes," before social linguists found "distinctive grammatical patterns"(Kochman, 1981, p.8). Varieties of English, such as Englishes in Singapore, Thailand, India, and other former colonies of British Empire have been gaining respect as a proper language by which people can successfully communicate.

Obsession with correct English

Although there are varieties of English and effective communication is accomplished by "broken" English, Japanese are obsessed with correct English. According to the Ministry of Education of Japan goals of a foreign language education is "to understand a foreign language, to acquire basic skills to express in the language, to nurture an attitude that encourages active communication in the language, to nourish the language and culture, to provide a basis for international understanding"(Ministry of Education, 1989).

However, most Japanese want to be perfect when they use English. The goal of English language education is to achieve "correct" English. Japanese are concerned too much with learning correct English both in grammar and social situations. For example, English examination tests grammatical knowledge of students and mistakes are negatively graded. A lot of books are published to telling what to say in particular social situations in America and England. Some native English teachers try to correct expressions of students that are not appropriate in American society, saying "Well, your sentence is grammatically acceptable. But in America, we don't say it this way!" Japanese scholars and English teachers desperately need native speakers to check when they write papers in English. When a native speaker corrects only prepositions and articles, they are somewhat unhappy, because they want their papers to be corrected perfectly. It can be said that appropriate use of language in various social settings is included in the atmosphere for seeking correctness.

Inferiority feelings

Excessive emphasis on using grammatically and socially correct language creates problems when people learn a language as a foreign language. When learning a foreign language, teachers always give students negative feedback, correcting their mistakes. Teachers cannot help this, because they are obsessed with teaching correct English. Students are forced to compare their English with native speakers' English which is flawless and beautiful. Constant comparison

and attention to mistakes reduce learners' self-esteem. He sees that his way of speaking may be wrong in the eyes of native speakers. He worries that a native speaker will find a lot of mistakes in his writing. He feels strongly about the superiority of native speakers and neurotically thinks that his English is inadequate and inferior. In this way, inferiority feelings are developed.

Also, when English learners try to achieve only correct English, they will suffer from a sense of inability to master native speakers' English. The mother tongue of a learner influences his use of a foreign language, unless he is exposed to such language at the early stage of his life. Due to this inevitable intervention of his mother tongue, he can hardly get out of the framework of his mother tongue. His vocabulary, pronunciation and expression are affected by the tacit rule of his mother tongue. No matter how hard he tries to achieve native-like proficiency, it is simply hopeless to achieve native-like proficiency.

Discouraged and displeased students

As Dreikurs (1971) stated that "inferiority feelings undermine our courage and arouse fears (p. 66)," a sense of inadequacy in English language leads Japanese students to give up their efforts to learn English. Their perceived difficulty and doubt in their ability may become so enormous that overcoming the task looks impossible. Japanese are afraid of making mistakes, because mistakes further prove their inability. Their conviction that their English is always wrong and that they can never be able to master the language is pervasive among discouraged Japanese students who hate English. Unfortunately, students who are too discouraged to overcome inferior feelings by means of achievement discontinue making efforts of communicating in English. Most others are discouraged and think that "I know I can't reach the level I want to go, so why try?"

There is another way to respond to inferiority feelings. Some become angry and decide to rebel against English teachers, native speakers and social pressure to learn English. Feeling incompetent, they refuse to participate in English conversation class by using silence and sullen faces. Feeling coerced by international pressure to use English, some may go on to the extreme of attacking the role of English as the international language. This kind of overreaction to inferiority feelings can be found in the logic of advocates who object to using English as an international language because English is a symbol of imperialism (Katori, 1996).

Distorted psychological make-up

Inferiority feelings are related to both admiring the powerful and contempt of the weak. In case of Japanese this kind of distorted psychological characteristic is found in their worshiping American and British English and in their aversion to

other varieties of English. Those who view American and British English as the authority are eager to learn, emulate, and respect American and British English. On the other hand, they despise other English varieties, mostly Asian and African varieties.

According to Tsuda (1989), this kind of distorted psychological characteristic as among Japanese is also seen in Hong Kong. He points out that English speakers are considered as "first grade citizens," while Chinese speakers are treated as "second grade citizens."

Thus, Japanese treat American and British English as the only correct English, having the wrong conviction about English, and are overly concerned with correctness. As a result they suffer from inferiority feelings, which have created discouraged and displeased students of English and distorted psychological make-up of Japanese English learners. One cannot perform effective and open communication with others, having these psychological problems.

The psychological dimension of communicative competence

In order to solve these problems, Tsuda (1996) proposes to limit using English in international settings. It may be possible if political leaders agree on such a policy. However, I doubt the feasibility of such a policy. People use a language which is convenient and communicative. Presently it is undeniable that English is the most common language in the world. Another idea for solving the problem is to stop using American and British English as the model. However, simply abandoning the model will not solve the problem, because a model is necessary in a foreign language education. Looking for another model is not helpful either, because the inability of Japanese to communicate openly does not originate from the treatment of American and British English as the model but from the psychological insecurity of Japanese people. We need to focus on the real issue.

English learners in Japan are faced with a psychological barrier for open communication. Presently neither teachers nor students know how to overcome this barrier. Teachers sincerely hope that their students voluntarily speak up without worrying about mistakes. They first try to force them to speak, but in the end they give up trying. Students, too, wish to express what they think, but they sense possible ridicule of peers and teachers when they make mistakes, and consequently they stop trying. Even those who have good command of English become nervous when they are in a situation to express their opinion in front of native speakers.

This is understandable because Japanese language is not well equipped with manners and expressions that promote open communication. Japanese language is highly hierarchical with heavy emphasis on the status of the communicators. For example, there are two kinds of honorific language, one showing respect by raising others, another showing respect by lowering oneself.

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Also people address others by their titles rather than names. It is common to call a teacher by a title as "teacher" instead of "Mr."   The right to speak is granted by the superior. It is considered rude to speak without permission from the superior. Influenced by the tradition of society and language in Japan, Japanese are not able to express their thoughts and feelings freely.

Actually all languages reflect the hierarchical structure of society. English is not an exception. In English, polite forms are used to show respect and there are various levels of politeness. A mother is allowed to command to her child saying "Do the dishes." But she will politely ask her supervisor showing respect by saying, "Could you sign here?" Comparison of British English and American English is more interesting; British English is more polite than American English, reflecting more the hierarchical British society.

Thomas and Marchant (1993) point out that the present emerging democratic society means not only political and economic changes but basic changes in all human relationships. They contend that we are living in a different social atmosphere than that of the autocratic society in which one was either in a superior position or an inferior position. In the autocratic society a subordinate person, accepting his inferiority, gives in to an order of a dominant person. However, in a democratic society, each individual is equal in terms of personal worth, value, and dignity as well as rights and responsibilities. No one is willing to admit the superiority of others.

Language used in the autocratic society, characterized with superior and inferior positions, has lost effectiveness in a democratic society. Language between the superior and the inferior was consistent with the autocratic culture and it was a means by which people in power could enforce their will upon their subordinates. Society supported the rights of the superior to speak in a disrespectful manner to the inferior. Today's society, however, does not support such an approach. Everyone is expected to be treated with respectful language, because a democratic society gives the same rights to everyone.

I believe that psychological problems in communication is caused by the lack of an established tradition about the use of language that serves as a medium to maintain equal and respectful human relationships. Since language is transmitted from generation to generation, language follows the tradition of the autocratic society. Although language effective in the autocratic society is becoming obsolete in this modern democratic society, we do not know how to use democratically appropriate language. We have never systematically learned how to communicate with others who have the same values and rights. As a result, we hurt other's feelings by using the old type of language that is characterized with differences in power, knowledge, experience, and wealth.

One way to encourage open communication is to change our attitude toward the language we use. Since we think and feel by way of language, to change the way we think and feel is achieved by using language differently. Language has an extremely deep significance for the development of the ability to communicate. Traditional use of language, which dates back to pre-democratic times, possesses qualities that are not appropriate in the modern democratic society where everyone is treated as equals. We need to consider the ability to use language appropriately in the modern democratic society, so that everybody is able to engage in open communication. With respectful communication we do not need to worry about making mistakes. Also in democratic communication, we are able to solve disagreement and conflict by negotiation rather than coercion or submission.

I would like to propose a new concept for communicative competence. That is an ability to use democratically appropriate language. This ability consists of three qualities: equality, empathy and encouragement. For effective communication, people must use language believing in equality of individuals, with empathy and encouragement.

Equality

The ability to use democratically appropriate language includes a belief that individuals are equal, as democracy requires the equality of people. Here the word democracy means not a political form, but the principles of social equality and respect for an individual. Social equality cannot and should not result in the sameness of individuals. There will always be differences in power, prestige, income, culture, language, resources, and achievement no matter how narrow the distance between the upper and lower limits. But to the extent that individuals have an ability to make a contribution for the benefit of a social system, whether it be a dyadic relationship, a family, or a community, they are equal (Thomas & Marchant, 1993).

Traditional use of language often reflects inequality and discrimination in a society. In the United States first names were used to place black people in the lower status (Johnson, 1943, p.140). Blacks were called by their first names in a situation where a title and last names must be used to address a white person.

Belief in equality can be expressed and promoted by using language democratically. Teachers can show respect by using respectful language to students. Instead of giving a command such as "answer the questions on page 80," they can tell students "please answer the questions on page 80."   Parents can give a model of treating others as equals to their children by expressing an appreciation such as "thank you for taking out the garbage." Native speakers may ask non-native speakers, instead of ignoring poorly-conceptualized opinions, "I would like to understand your point, so please say that again." A man can stop calling a woman a

"girl" when he says to a business client "I will send a girl to you," if he considers a relationship on an equal basis (Jamison, 1975). One can show that opinions of all have equal worth by speaking to others with respect.

Empathy

The ability to use democratically appropriate language includes empathy in communication. Assuming that everybody communicates differently with his own private logic and value systems, a message sender is expected to possess a great amount of empathy to understand needs and desires of a receiver. When an interaction occurs in an international and intercultural setting, one should exhibit a greater amount of empathy for effective communication.

Psychologists and therapists found that traditional use of language exhibited lack of empathy. Adler (1977) points out that conventional requests by parents and teachers for peace such as "Don't get angry," "There's nothing to worry about," "What are you talking about?," "That's nonsense" convey to the listener that I am not interested in your feeling. There are plenty of expressions that restricts people from developing an ability to share emotions, although they seem nothing more than a conventional expression.

Writing about language used by parents, Faber & Mazlish (1980) points out as follows:
They [parents] too can help themselves if they have a listening ear and an empathic response. But the language of empathy does not come naturally to us. It's not part of our "mother tongue." Most of us grew up having our feelings denied. To become fluent in this new language of acceptance, we have to learn and practice its methods (p.9).

Adler (1977) contends that sharing emotions is beneficial for human beings. Feelings misunderstood, denied, or unexpressed are related to stress, headaches, chronic back pains, and psychosomatic illnesses. Beyond the effects on health, understanding and expressing emotions help build trust among individuals. Being afraid of feelings denied, people often hold back their feelings. As a result, their relationship becomes superficial. Accustomed to respond in ways that discourage sharing, they gradually lose an ability to be in tune with their own feelings as well as others'. However, as they begin to really talk about how they feel, they become closer to each other. As they learn to listen, they are able to build a positive relationship.

Dinkmeyer, McKay and Dinkmeyer (1989) invented a skill to exhibit empathy. To understand and respect one's feelings, "reflective listening" (p. 70) is recommended. Reflective listening helps a person learn the language of feelings and to express more clearly his feelings, which are often hidden behind words. Instead of preaching the importance of going to school to a child who is upset and crying

loudly, "School is dumb!", the parent can be empathetic to the child by employing reflective listening and say, "Sounds like you're angry about something that happened at school today"(p. 71). Reflective listening helps people develop empathy.

When talking about emotions, Gordon (1970) suggests to use "I-messages" instead of "You-messages" (p. 115). Gordon explains that messages containing the word "you" often blame, attack and insult, such as "You make me feel sick!" Messages implying criticism and threat discourage sharing feelings and contribute to creating a sullen looking person who is not willing to express his thoughts and feelings. Instead, a more effective way of communication is to use "I-messages." You can calmly express your emotions, saying "I don't feel good when you call me names." I-messages focus on the feeling of a speaker rather than a fault of others. I-messages describe how the speaker feels when something unpleasant occurs. Since I-messages simply express how he feels, they do not put down, nag or blame.

Encouragement

The ability to use democratically appropriate language includes encouragement that will emancipate individuals from inferior feelings. Compare a situation that you communicate better and a situation you cannot do well. What makes the difference is the encouragement or discouragement we receive. We express ourselves better in front of those who positively evaluate our ability, but we do poorer in front of those who may ridicule, belittle, accuse, or threaten our sense of self-worth.

According to McKay (1992), "discouragement is based upon the belief that one is not adequate to meet life's challenges"(p.1). McKay articulated five qualities of discouragement: negative expectations, unreasonably high standards, overambition, overemphasis on competition, and focusing on mistakes (p. 1-4). A discouraged person anticipates failure, believing in his lack of ability. He tends to have goals that are unrealistically high. He is never satisfied with his performance, because he seeks a higher goal. For an overly competitive person winning is everything. If he does not win, he is a "loser." A discouraged person fears making mistakes and he avoids trying most of things he may not able to perform well, although mistakes are doors to improvement.

Discouragement is a serious problem in language classroom. When a student makes a mistake, the teacher corrects it. When a non-native speaker uses English differently, a native-speaker responds less positively. Japanese learners of English are oversensitive to making mistakes. If they could receive encouragement when they learn English, they would not be bothered by their mistakes.

Albert Ellis, a distinguished psychologist, maintains that people discourage themselves by saying irrational sentences (Ellis & Harper, 1985). For example,

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when you make a mistake, you may say something like, "I made a mistake again! It is awful! I am stupid! I will never learn!" By saying these things to yourself, you will become discouraged. However, if you look at a mistake as an opportunity to improvement, you can encourage yourself by saying, "I made a mistake again! I don't like it. Now what can I do to avoid making the same mistake?" The latter sentences are based upon a rational belief; making a mistake does not mean that you are stupid, but an opportunity to be successful. People use discouraging language to discourage themselves and others.

Dreikurs (1971) says that encouragement is "the most important single quality in getting along with others"(p. 121) and "children need encouragement as a plant needs sun and water" (p. 121). Encouragement is a basic human need. Many scholars have articulated elements of encouragement (Ansbacher,1956; Grunwald & McAbee, 1985; McKay, 1992; Nelsen, Lott & Glenn, 1993; Lew & Bettner, 1995; Bettner & Lew, 1996). Since introducing the whole idea of encouragement goes far beyond the scope of this article, I will limit it only to the area of language education.

Encouraging language, which focuses on assets and strengths of individuals, must replace discouraging language. Dinkmeyer, McKay and Dinkmeyer (1989) explain the language of encouragement as follows:

Although there are times when praise can be encouraging, parents will be most effective if they avoid praising children too often. Remember, we encourage to help our children believe in themselves. But when we use words such as good, great, and excellent, we're usually not doing that. Instead, we're expressing our values and opinions.

Encouragement has its own language. Here are some examples of phrases that express encouragement for young children's efforts:
"You seem to like that."
"How do you feel about it?"
"You can do it."
"Thanks; that helped me a lot."
"I need your help on _____."
    "You really worked hard on that!"
"You're getting better at _____." (Be specific.) (p. 53)

Teachers are often not aware how their language discourage their students. They praise students trying to motivate them. Actually, however, they judge students by their own values when they say something like "excellent." Similarly, they often use discouraging language characterized with criticism, comparison and threats such as "You should have done better," "She can do it, so you can do it," or "If you can't solve this problem, you will never succeed in life." Praise and criticism used to be effective in an autocratic relationship. A subordinate felt motivated by

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receiving these comments from his superior. This belief is still pervasive among teachers who hope that these comments will motivate students to learn. However, these are not effective anymore in a democratic relationship. Criticism and comparison lower students' self-esteem, and threats almost always invite open retaliation or silent rebellion. Teachers must learn how to use language in an encouraging way.

Conclusion

This article has shed light on the psychological dimension of communicative competence. After reviewing psychological problems of Japanese learners of English and the limitation of the present concepts of communicative competence, it contended that the traditional use of language, which is based upon hierarchical human relationships, displayed beliefs and communications patterns that discouraged aspiring students. It also argued that we have an ability to use democratically appropriate language, because using a medium of communication that showed positive attitudes about ourselves and others could help solve psychological problems. Three elements of the ability were proposed; they were equality, empathy and encouragement. These elements are considered significant in effective communication by studies in psychology and human communication.

Although the scope of this article is limited to English language education, an ability to use democratically appropriate language as a psychological concept of communicative competence is useful in various situations. It will help not only discouraged students but all people overcome their inferiority feelings, because "to be a human being means to feel oneself inferior" (Adler, 1964, p. 131). Inferiority feelings are common to all of us; human-beings are small and weak in comparison with society and nature. Dreikurs (1971) continues that "inferiority feelings induce [man] to wage unnecessary wars, to be defensive against his fellow man, to strive for unreal or empty victories, instead of devoting his energies to making this earth a pleasant place for all men to inhabit" (p. 67).

If we use language to overcome psychological problems, we will be able to meet challenges of an emerging global society where people having different linguistic and cultural background must cooperate. Due to rapid development of communication technology, the world is becoming an interdependent community (Hachten,1987). And this interdependent society faces commonly affecting problems like the greenhouse effect, overpopulation, poverty, and scarce resources. Today's situation that people in the world must cooperate to solve these problems requires an ability to use democratically appropriate language to overcome differences in political and economic power and resources

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It is not easy to change the way we use language. It is true that we must follow the convention of language to make ourselves understood. When learning a foreign language, especially, learning what is correct and what is wrong is undeniably important. Also, our human relationship is still hierarchical, and society is competitive and mistake-centered. It is also true that some accents and dialects are valued more than others (Giles & Powesland, 1975). For example, Spanish accented speech in the southwestern United States (Ryan & Carrenza, 1975) is considered inferior.

However, if we keep trying to change our way of using language, a change will occur gradually. With an ability to communicate democratically, people are able to overcome their psychological problems. Using democratically appropriate language, they can solve interpersonal problems as well as cross-cultural and international difficulties through open negotiation. In this way conflict among human beings will be decreased. As a communication researcher, changing the way we communicate is a step toward the goal.

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