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Factors Affecting Pronunciation Learning for Japanese EFL Students 2: Sociopsychological and Instructional Issues

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There are various factors that affect Japanese EFL learners' attainment level of English pronunciation skills. The relatively stable individual features of each learner, including age, cross-linguistic influence, aptitude, personality, and gender were discussed in an article available in a previous issue (Kondo, 2018a). In this paper, the dynamic individual factors are examined according to both a sociopsychological and instructional framework. Sociopsychological factors include acculturation, motivation, and peer pressure in Japanese EFL classrooms, while the instructional factors include the goals and focuses related to L2 instruction. A second discussion elaborates on the related pedagogical implications for teaching English pronunciation in Japanese classroom settings.

Keywords : second language acquisition, L2 pronunciation, individual differences, Japanese EFL learners

1. Introduction

Many ES/FL instructors and scholars have pointed out the existence of individual differences in L2 pronunciation (e.g., Moyer, 2013; Piske, MacKay, & Flege, 2001). There are various affecting factors, including age, cross-linguistic influence, aptitude, personality, and gender. These factors are discussed in an article available in a previous issue (Kondo, 2018a). While language instructors may feel they can offer less support when attempting to change those relatively stable individual features for each learner, there are also dynamic factors (i.e., sociopsychological and instructional) that change on an individual basis among L2 learners, many of which depend on experience and the environment. These are significant factors that language instructors must understand in order to help students improve L2 pronunciation. This paper elaborates on these dynamic factors based on a literature review of previous theoretical and empirical studies in the field. The pedagogical implications of these issues for teaching English pronunciation in Japan are then discussed.

2. Sociopsychological Factors

2.1 Acculturation and motivation

Acculturation is the primary sociopsychological factor that influences pronunciation acquisition in a target language. Here, acculturation refers to “the social and psychological integration of the individual with the target language group” (Schumann, 1978, p.29). It thus plays a vital role in second

language acquisition. That is, the more strongly learners desire to socially and affectively integrate into a target culture, the better they learn pronunciation in the target language.

Several social variables influence acculturation, including social dominance and the level of congruence between the first and target cultures. These factors influence power relations between the L1 group and the group comprised of target-language speakers. The L2 group tends to feel pressure to learn the target language in this context. This is largely due to the relatively lower status of the L1 culture when situated in a new environment. Social status within the target culture also influences pronunciation acquisition (Brosh, 1993). The influence of this factor within the target culture is linguistically exemplified through the process of learning Japanese dialects. Japanese people generally identify Tokyo as the most recognized area in Japan. This facilitates willing integration into the Tokyo community. As such, there is increased motivation to learn the dialect, which is also recognized as the standard Japanese accent. For example, individuals who relocate to Tokyo tend to acquire the Tokyo dialect with relative ease. On the other hand, individuals who move from Tokyo to other cities do not typically learn or acquire the local dialects in those areas.

While social variables are involved in the relationship between language groups, the psychological factors serve as affective variables that apply to individual differences (e.g., the degree of language and culture shock, ego permeability,

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and motivation). Schumann (1986) argued that affective variables were more dominant than social ones. For instance, learners tend to desire integration when they hold positive attitudes toward native speakers of their target language, even when there are perceptions of a low social status of the target language. The effects of acculturation on pronunciation learning are illustrated through L1 cases, specifically exemplifying communication accommodation theory (Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2005), which discuss that individuals develop a similar manner of speaking when they hold positive attitudes toward one other. Such interactions are frequently observed between family members, romantic couples, and close friends. The amount of exposure or time spent communicating is also an influencing factor. Nonetheless, it is assumed that individuals who hold positive attitudes toward one another upon first meeting may consciously or unconsciously attempt to adopt similar speech patterns.

The above examples and discussions involving L1 speech can also be applied to L2 speech. In short, it is important for Japanese English learners to recognize the significant role of English as an international language, and to gain familiarity with or hold positive opinions toward the culture or people speaking their target language when attempting to improve pronunciation.

In fact, studies indicate that sociopsychological factors are significant in the L2 pronunciation context. For instance, Kondo (2018b) revealed a positive relationship between L2 integrative motivation (which refers to the desire to learn a language in order to communicate with people of the target culture or identify with the target language community) and L2 pronunciation during an investigation of Japanese EFL learners. Results showed a positive relationship between L2 pronunciation skills and integrative motivation (measured as the degree of acculturation as a particular motivator for learning English). Here, L2 pronunciation and motivation were significantly correlated ($r = .43, p < .001$), while a regression analysis indicated that 23% of the variance in L2 pronunciation could be explained by the degree of integrative motivation (acculturation). The same study indicated that this degree of influence was more influential than working memory capacity (an aptitude factor).

Instrumental motivation is another sociopsychological factor in language learning. It has been substantially discussed in second language acquisition. The term refers to the idea of learning a language in order to reach certain goals, such as obtaining employment, entering a university, or achieving career advancement. Several studies have shown that learning L2 as a personal or professional goal can influence one's

motivation or desire to acquire native-like pronunciation (Bernaus, Masgoret, Gardner & Reyes, 2004; Gatbonton, Trofimovich & Magid, 2005; Moyer, 1999). Moyer (1999) showed that professional motivation (a type of instrumental motivation) strongly influenced L2 pronunciation learning during an examination of 24 graduate students who were teaching at a university-level German program in the US. Specifically, a regression analysis revealed that professional motivation significantly explained 41% of the variance in an L2 pronunciation task; it thus had a greater influence than a subject's age of immersion (an age factor).

The above studies indicate that motivation (understood as sociopsychological factors for language learning) plays a significant role in L2 pronunciation learning. This is pedagogically insightful because language learners and teachers can work to improve this factor (more so than static factors such as aptitude and age).

2.2 Classroom peer pressure

Peer pressure is an important sociopsychological factor for Japanese students who learn English at school. Notably, most Japanese learners acquire English in this setting. Many EFL teachers in Japan recognize that peer pressure may have a substantial effect on L2 pronunciation learning. For example, students may deliberately speak English with a heavy Japanese accent even though they are able to correctly produce the target sounds. They may wish to avoid a conspicuous class presence by showing an ability that is rare among their classmates (Tsui, 1995; Wakamoto, 2009). Because students nearing puberty often criticize the language and behavior of their peers (Brown, 2007), they are very sensitive to class behavior and thus avoid actions that may result in teasing or derision. Here, individuals are expected to behaviorally assimilate. They may otherwise become targets of ridicule or related peer pressures. Students who demonstrate native-like English pronunciation in Japanese English classrooms may thus receive negative peer responses, including bullying. This problem is more pronounced in Japan than in many other countries, such as the US (Furuta, 1996). As such, this sociopsychological factor may be detrimental to Japanese individuals who are learning and practicing English pronunciation in a school setting. During an investigation of child, adolescent, and adult Dutch second-language students, Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) revealed possible difficulties for adolescent pronunciation learners. Their results indicated that adolescent participants were overwhelmingly superior to both child and adult learners in all skills except for pronunciation, suggesting that the sociopsychological and

cultural factors discussed here may significantly affect pronunciation learning for individuals in that age group.

3. Instructional Factors

3.1 Lack of focus on teaching pronunciation in the Japanese EFL setting

Inadequately focused instruction substantially contributes to weak pronunciation skills among Japanese EFL learners. Although oral communication skills receive significant attention, Japanese English classes place relatively little emphasis on pronunciation (Ogihara, 2005; Saito, 2007; Teshima, 2011). This may be a result of (1) entrance examination requirements, which do not prioritize pronunciation skills and (2) low confidence levels among Japanese EFL teachers regarding their own English pronunciation skills (Elliot, 1995; Teshima, 2011).

Elliot (1995) discussed that pronunciation was not as important as other language skills. This notion was further supported by an emphasis on written testing in the EFL context. The same issues exist in Japan. For example, most high school and university entrance examinations include only a few questions related to pronunciation knowledge (e.g., word-level discrimination and the identification of English sounds). These paper-based tests do not require the participant to produce any English sounds. Thus, students tend to make less of an effort to acquire the ability to produce sounds. In the most problematic cases, students are able to pass these tests simply by memorizing the phonetic symbols for each word instead of learning the actual sounds.

A second problem involves the lack of adequately trained pronunciation teachers. Many language teachers simply do not receive specific training in this area (Foote, Holtby & Derwing, 2012). A large number of Japanese EFL teachers thus lack confidence in their own English pronunciation skills. This is partly because most active EFL teachers did not receive sufficient English pronunciation instruction while learning the language as a student. In Japan, the methods used to teach pronunciation are less developed than those used for other language skills (e.g., vocabulary and grammar). Many teachers are essentially unfamiliar with proper instructional procedures (Ogihara, 2005). Rather, current teaching methods generally depend on the experiences teachers developed as students themselves. This creates an unproductive cycle in which teachers avoid instructing students on pronunciation due to low confidence in their own pronunciation skills and a limited understanding of effective methods to teach pronunciation. Students of these teachers thus tend to avoid pronunciation instruction when becoming teachers themselves.

Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015) also pointed out the difficulty involved in mastering pronunciation skills as one of the reasons for less focused instruction. Findings indicate that pronunciation requires more time and energy than other language areas (e.g., vocabulary and grammar). However, increased time and effort do not necessarily produce satisfactory results. These difficulties may therefore contribute to the lack of emphasis Japanese EFL teachers tend to place on pronunciation instruction.

3.2 Segmentals and suprasegmentals for intelligibility

Pronunciation instruction should be designed to improve intelligibility or comprehensibility (Jenkins, 2000) rather than result in native-like speech production. This is because native-like pronunciation is extremely challenging for most postpubescent learners (Scovel, 1988); nevertheless, it is, not impossible for some (Oishi, 2000). EFL teachers in Japan should design instructional methods to improve intelligibility and comprehensibility (not setting unachievable goals, such as acquiring native-like pronunciation) while making the best use of the limited formal instruction offered in Japanese EFL classes.

Outside Japan, the instructional emphasis has shifted from segmental features to suprasegmental features. This change was influenced by a series of related studies indicating the importance of suprasegmental features (Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson & Koehler, 1992; Derwing & Rossiter, 2003; Field, 2005; Munro & Derwing, 1999). However, segmental features (e.g., discriminating between /l/ and /r/ or /s/ and /θ/, which are often tested in entrance examinations) tend to receive the greatest focus in Japan. Meanwhile, suprasegmental features (e.g., linking, sentence prominence, rhythm, and intonation) receive less classroom attention and are not well-covered on examinations.

Several studies have examined whether teachers focus on segmental features or suprasegmental features while engaged in pronunciation instruction, but results have been inconsistent. Some studies have also indicated that lack of proficiency in suprasegmental features may enhance the perceptibility of a speaker's foreign accent, thereby affecting intelligibility (Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson & Koehler, 1992; Hahn, 2004; Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1998; Magen, 1998; Darcy, Ewert & Lidster, 2012; Yates, 2003; Field, 2005; Van den Doel, 2006). Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson & Koehler (1992) conducted a study among 60 speakers from 11 different language groups. Here, native speakers were asked to judge intelligibility based on a number of variables. Results showed that suprasegmental variables influenced intelligibility more

than segmental variables. Furthermore, Hahn (2004) tested for the effects of sentence prominence, one of the suprasegmental features, by examining speech samples from an advanced Korean speaker of English. Results indicated that sentence prominence played a significant role in comprehension. Other studies examining non-native speakers from different L1 groups have also supported the idea that stress placement plays an important role in intelligibility (Field, 2005; Van den Doel, 2006).

On the other hand, studies dealing with Japanese EFL learners have indicated that segmentals strongly influence intelligibility. For instance, Kashiwagi and Snyder (2008) investigated which factors cause mistakes in pronunciation among Japanese EFL speakers by analyzing speech samples from 20 participants. Results indicated that the pronunciation mistakes leading to listener misunderstanding were related to segmental features, while few suprasegmental features (except for word stress) caused intelligibility problems. A later study showed that segmental features such as vowels (/æ/, /ɑ:/, and /ʌ/) and consonants (/ð/, /r/, and /l/) significantly influenced intelligibility, but that suprasegmental features such as intonation and smoothness did not (Kashiwagi & Snyder, 2014).

In discussing this issue, consideration should be given to the type of speakers with whom learners communicate. Jenkins (2000) argued that segmentals play a more vital role than suprasegmental features in communication between non-native English speakers, which will take place more frequently owing to globalization. The rationale for this claim was supported by the discovery that speech is processed in different ways by native speakers and non-native speakers. That is, when attempting to comprehend messages, native-speakers tend to use more top-down processing in which they depend on larger units (or suprasegmentals) of speech information, while non-native speakers depend on bottom-up processing in which they depend on smaller units (i. e., segmentals).

If Jenkins is correct, then EFL teachers should consider the context in which their students are communicating in addition to who the interlocutor is when establishing instructional priority (Rogerson-Revell, 2011). For example, suprasegmental instruction may be more beneficial for Japanese students who are planning to study in English-speaking countries (e.g., the US or UK). On the other hand, students who will have more opportunities to communication with non-native English speakers may receive a greater benefits from segmental instruction.

In addition to the interlocutor factor, phonetic and

phonological distance should be considered when discussing segmentals and suprasegmentals in the context of intelligibility. Studies among L2 learners of Polish have indicated that the source of intelligibility problems is based on the specific L1 and target-language combination (Radomski & Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2014; Szpyra-Kozłowska & Radomski, 2012). In those studies, native Polish speakers indicated that the segmental-feature production of learners from other European countries significantly contributed to intelligibility problems, while they tended to focus on suprasegmental issues (e.g., intonation and word stress) when comprehending speech from Chinese learners of Polish. This is because Chinese learners use suprasegmental systems that are very different from those of native Polish speakers.

For Japanese EFL learners, both suprasegmental and segmental features can be major sources of intelligibility problems. This is because Japanese differs markedly from English in terms of its sound system. For instance, Japanese is a mora-timed language, while English is a stress-timed language. Japanese EFL learners thus tend to have problems with rhythm, word and sentence stress, and vowel reduction. It is thus important for language teachers to identify particular segmental and suprasegmental aspects that may cause intelligibility problems during L2 pronunciation instruction.

Instructional effectiveness should also be discussed in the context of segmental and suprasegmental issues. Some instructors doubt the efficacy of pronunciation instruction because improvement is achieved less easily than for other related skills. However, Saito (2007) and Saito & Saito (2017) showed that pronunciation instruction significantly affected both segmental and suprasegmental features for speech production among Japanese EFL learners. Furthermore, Saito (2012) reviewed 15 quasi-interventional studies and showed that instructional effects were evident in most studies. He also revealed that segmental and suprasegmental features could be improved through a focus-on-form type of instruction. However, most studies have failed to demonstrate improvement through the focus-on-meaning type. In addition, all studies dealing with postpubescent learners have indicated the possibility of improving L2 pronunciation skills, even for those who were past the critical period. However, these instructional effects may vary according to the type of speech task. For instance, studies by Elliott (1997) and Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe (1998) revealed that suprasegmental instruction affected a spontaneous speech task, but that segmental instruction did not.

4. Pedagogical Implications

4.1 Improving learner motivation

Many Japanese EFL learners believe they are unable to enhance their pronunciation skills without extensive exposure to the target language (e.g., by studying or living abroad), based on the notion that learners must be exposed to sounds in the target language to acquire the pronunciation skills. However, the extent of exposure does not necessarily correlate with L2 pronunciation skills. In fact, millions of immigrants possess weak L2 pronunciation skills despite having lived abroad for long periods of time. Oyama (1976) investigated 60 Italian immigrants in the US and showed that length of residence did not correlate with their degree of foreign accent. It is thus evident that living or studying in an L2-speaking country (or otherwise gaining heavy exposure to a target language) does not necessarily ensure that learners will improve their L2 skills.

The dissociation between amount of exposure and improvement in pronunciation can be explained by various factors, including age and aptitude (as discussed in the previous issue). However, the motivation to master pronunciation in a target language can strongly influence L2 pronunciation learning. In fact, Kondo (2018b) showed that motivation had stronger effects on the pronunciation skills of Japanese EFL learners than working memory capacity (an aptitude factor). Motivation can compensate for the disadvantages experienced by EFL learners who have difficulty in gaining sufficient exposure to a target language. In other words, learners can expect to improve their L2 pronunciation skills even with limited exposure or without having the opportunity to live in the L2-speaking country provided they maintain a strong motivation or desire to acquire the related skills (Marinova-Todd, Marshall & Snow, 2000).

Learners attempting to gain L2 pronunciation skills lack control over a variety of factors (e.g., age, linguistic differences, and aptitude). However, motivation is an important and dynamic factor that both learners and teachers should work to improve. In fact, Brown (2001) argued that motivation was the absolute most important individual factor for acquiring the target language pronunciation. It is thus incredibly important for language teachers to stimulate or maintain learner motivation when attempting to improve their students' L2 pronunciation.

There are several types of motivation. As discussed in the section titled sociopsychological factors, integrative motivation is a significant factor for learning pronunciation. In formal language instruction in Japan, however, it is challenging for teachers to stimulate integrative motivation among students. This is because students tend to have limited

exposure to the target-language culture and do not prioritize integration. English teachers should thus design classroom activities so that students can foster positive attitudes toward (or at least develop an interest in) English-speaking peoples or cultures; this not only refers to those who speak English as a native language, but also includes individuals who speak English as a second or foreign language. As one of the teaching approaches, using films in language classrooms can be a useful teaching approach to help students to develop an interest in the target cultures. Research has shown that the practice of viewing films in the target language can improve integrative motivation for Japanese learners (Kondo, 2009, 2018c). In both studies, integrative motivation of the students who received film-based instruction was significantly improved compared to the students who received English instruction without using films.

Learning can further be promoted by stimulating intrinsic motivation. It is very important for students to recognize self-improvement when attempting to maintain motivation. That is, they tend to work harder when they feel that their skills have improved. In sum, teachers should carefully design pronunciation instruction activities so that students are aware of their own progress. For example, recording student performance before and after instruction can help them recognize areas of improvement. However, there is limited instruction time in the Japanese EFL context, meaning that teachers may not be able to cover all pronunciation features. It is therefore necessary to selectively focus on certain features during instruction. For example, teachers may choose to focus on pronunciation features for which learners can easily detect their own improvements. This may encourage them to quickly identify their improvements within a limited time frame.

4.2 Segmental and suprasegmental instruction

Both segmental and suprasegmental training are required to improve intelligibility and comprehensibility. However, Japanese pronunciation teaching practices and textbooks place more focus on segmental features. This is partly due to the limited amount of class time available to learn pronunciation. While a full conclusion cannot be arrived at on the basis of the current literature, Japanese EFL teachers should pay more attention to suprasegmental features when helping students improve intelligibility. Indeed, several studies explored in this paper showed that suprasegmental features are significant when it comes to improving intelligibility (e.g. Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson & Koehler, 1992). Moreover, the instructional effect seems increasingly important given the limited time allocated for formal instruction in the Japanese context. Both

learners and teachers can detect the results of instruction more easily and efficiently when they engage in suprasegmental instruction. A study by McNerney and Mendelsohn (1992) supported this conclusion. They argued that teaching suprasegmental features in pronunciation courses (especially those with limited time) not only increased English comprehensibility, but also helped avoid learner frustration. This is because learners can thereby perceive greater changes in their pronunciation over the short term. This can greatly stimulate their intrinsic motivation, thus encouraging them to continue working hard to improve their skills.

4. Conclusion

Building on a discussion about the stable individual factors in the previous issue, this paper explored how L2 pronunciation skills are affected by a variety of dynamic factors, including sociopsychological issues, motivation, and instruction. As both issues discussed, individual differences in these areas affect the way learners master L2 pronunciation skills, and the amount of effort does not necessarily explain or predict the level of skill which learners attain. Thus, it is hoped that EFL teachers in Japan understand both the stable and dynamic individual factors affecting L2 pronunciation learning and design their instructional methods accordingly, rather than teaching as they were taught.

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