

The Importance of Enhancing Affective Factors for Linguistic Improvement

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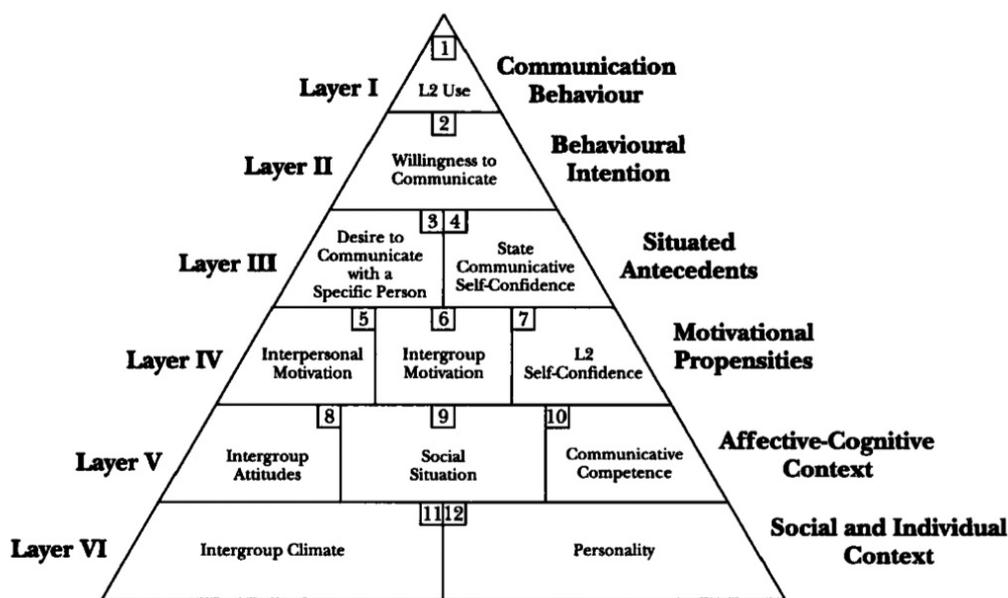
Making learners capable of communicating in a target language is one of the teaching goals in language education. In Japan, an action plan was proposed in 2003 to cultivate “Japanese with English abilities” (MEXT, 2003), that is, a Japanese population who can fully interact with others in English. However, the reality in English classes in Japan suggests that we are far from achieving this goal. Despite the fact that it has been six years at least since they started learning English, the majority of university students are not yet ready to communicate in English. Students rarely speak English and discuss topics with their peers in English class. They have the grammatical knowledge necessary to construct sentences, but they lack the confidence to speak it. In other words, university students may hesitate to speak English unless they have enough confidence in their linguistic knowledge, including about the sentences they make. Moreover, if students are too anxious about making errors and do not feel confident speaking the target language, they will not produce oral output. Instead, they keep silent in class or practice writing sentences, which results fewer opportunities to

produce output orally. In fact, two studies by the author revealed that Japanese EFL learners have low levels of self-confidence in speaking; however, these studies also revealed that these learners have high levels of willingness to speak English.

In the author’s pilot study¹ and actual study², which aimed to explore the impacts of pronunciation instruction and practice, the participants showed a low level of self-confidence in speaking English but a high level of willingness to speak English. The participants were asked to answer questionnaires after the interventions in each study in order to understand the impacts of the interventions. The questionnaires included some questions regarding the level of willingness to speak English and self-confidence in speaking English. All of the participants’ answers about their attitudes towards speaking showed a conflict between their willingness to speak English and their self-confidence about speaking English, suggesting that a low self-confidence may hinder learners from producing output in class. This can be a serious issue for language learning.

Output plays a crucial role in language learning. However, language acquisition

Figure 1
Heuristic Model of Variables Influencing WTC (MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyeri, & Noels, 1998)



may require more than just the enhancement of linguistic skills. As the figure in MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyeri, and Noels (1998; see Figure 1) shows, in order to reach to the point that output can be produced (“L2 Use” in the figure), a certain degree of self-confidence is necessary. That is, output will not be produced in the first place if learners do not want to produce output. Therefore, As MacIntyre, Burns, and Jessome (2011) have noted, the language learning environment, including instruction, must cultivate not only language skills but also psychological factors such as willingness to communicate and self-confidence.

How can such factors be enhanced? Unfortunately, there is not much existing literature that has investigated both linguistic and psychological changes in the language acquisition process. However, according to some participants' comments, including examples and communicative tasks can be beneficial. Students can make

sentences based on examples; in other words, they may not need to make sentences from scratch if they have examples to build from. This can help learners to feel less anxious about making errors. However, practicing only with example sentences is not sufficient to cultivate learners' linguistic skills; thus, it is necessary for learners to create their own communicative dialogues. Nevertheless, if the availability of examples decreases their level of anxiety, this can be a good first step for learners to orally practice English in tasks. To improve methods of language teaching in the future, more research in language education is required which explores both linguistic and psychological changes in language acquisition.

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ⁱ The main purpose of the pilot study was to reveal any limitations in pronunciation instruction, if there were any.

All participants received three sessions of 90-minute form-focused pronunciation instruction. First, they received pronunciation instruction on /f/, /v/, /p/ and /b/ sounds. These sounds were then practiced in order to become familiar with articulations. Two sounds, /f/ and /v/, do not exist in Japanese language; /p/ exists but is differently pronounced in English from Japanese when it appears in the beginning and the end of words such as “picture” and “map”. After practicing, all participants engaged in communicative speaking tasks such as role-plays. In the role-plays, words that had /f/, /v/, /p/ and /b/ were included. Thus, these sounds were communicatively practiced while the participants practiced speaking.

ⁱⁱ This research was carried out in a similar way to the pilot study. The differences were that this research had 1) more participants than the pilot study, 2) longer periods of interventions, and 3) two different types of learning settings (traditional face-to-face classroom setting and remote learning setting). Further information is given in Isobe (2021).