Investigating the underlying factors that impede “good” English learners from communicating in English

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Abstract
This presentation is intended as a summary of the sociological, psychological, and anthropological research on Japanese English learners’ affective tendencies, notably the concept of “other-directedness.” The purpose is to introduce an interdisciplinary grant-in-aid research project that will add further rigorous, empirical data to this discussion of second-language learning in Japan.

Keywords
communication apprehension, other-directedness, embarrassment, seken, willingness to communicate

Introduction
As societies are becoming ever more globalized, it can be argued that sufficient English communication competence has become a de facto condition for individual and community development (e.g., Jenkins, 2007). Indeed, work on the history of English education in Japan has described a “modernization” project that, since the emergence of the nation-state in the Meiji period, has included as a fundamental policy a focus on foreign language study (e.g., Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006; Seargent, 2009). Despite such a national educational policy that requires most Japanese to study English, many domestic and international observers perceive a society that is in general not communicatively competent in this foreign language (e.g., Poole, 2005). This research project will investigate the social psychological and social anthropological factors which may impede serious learners of English in Japan from being able to communicate (MacIntyre, 2007). In Japanese contexts, in particular, English proficiency has found to be not a positive cause of willingness to communicate and communication apprehension has been found to be negative cause of willingness to communicate (e.g., Yashima, 2002; Matsuoka, 2009). These findings may demand exploring impeding factors embedded in good learners of English.

2 Social anthropological factors

2.1 Other-directedness

Japanese society seems to value individuals who project an attitude of “other-directedness.” Though this “other-directedness” may function to increase individual motivation to communicate in English, we posit that in social settings sensitivity towards “the other” might increase communication apprehension and concomitantly decrease the level of willingness to communicate. As social animals, all humans probably maintain a certain level of communication apprehension. However, prior sociological and anthropological studies have pointed out a special propensity in Japan for “other-directedness” (e.g., Kuwayama, 1992, 2003; Maynard, 1997). The following subsections descript the features related to “other-directedness”.

2.1.1 Embarrassment: Face

Goffman (1959) explicated how “embarrassment” occurs when the expressive facts at hand threaten or discredit “face” or one’s expected social role or identity. In a study of “embarrassment” related to communication apprehension (Withers & Vernon, 2006), embarrassment predicted communication apprehension. Their study of embarrassment will be useful for the research on communication apprehension.

2.1.2 Seken

Abe (2001) established the notion of seken as a concept of life-world similar to that postulated by Husserl. Abe (2001) warned that the notion of
individuals in Japan is clearly different from that in Western contexts, because individuals in Japan need to be viewed in the framework of seken. He defines seken as relationships outside those of family members; each individual has a different seken. He also explains that seken relationships are not produced but simply exist wherever you are. These extra-familial relationships, seken, may actually strengthen features of “other-directedness”.

2.1.3 Status-related behavior
Kown (2002) investigated whether a “foreigner-complex” might affect Japanese communication difficulties with Westerners. He found that a high degree of status consciousness means that many Japanese become apprehensive and use a similar communication style when conversing with Westerners or Japanese from a higher social status. Since the participants for this study are Japanese college students, these findings should be taken into account when developing our questionnaire.

2.1.4 Identity construction
Lebra (2004) clarified how the Japanese construct their sense of self, using opposition logic and contingency logic. Following opposition logic, in the process of constructing a Western sense of self, subject and object are sharply differentiated based on the principle of the subject-object dichotomy. Citing the Geertz definition of the Western self, she explicates that the Western self is externally bounded in opposition to the other or non-self world, and is internally integrated into a whole with one’s own center. In contrast to opposition logic, Lebra proposes contingency logic, where the subject and object share the same space. In contingency logic, the way of looking at the subject and object, or the self and other, there is no self without the other, an operation that Lebra (2004) named “binding”. In this process, seken plays an important role as well. If Japanese identity is constructed this way, sensitivity towards “others” would make sense.

3 Pedagogical implications: psychological anthropology
Psychological anthropologists (e.g., Lutz, 1988) explicate the flexible nature of human emotions depending on contexts, an argument that Markus and Kitayama (1991) also make about learned cultural factors being instrumental in the formation of self and in the projection of emotions in social situations. On the other hand, as indicated in the term of trait-like communication apprehensions (McCrosky, 1997), learners may have different degrees of communication apprehension; however, these psychological anthropologists suggest that pedagogical intervention should modify the learners’ affective behaviors including communication apprehension.

4 Concluding remarks
Considering such sociocultural factors, our hope is that as applied linguists we may better develop effective pedagogical strategies which might enable “good” English learners with both a proficiency and motivation that is sufficient for communicating in English effectively.

This study will be used for developing items in the questionnaire to find social psychological and anthropological features of communication styles among Japanese college students.

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Selected references
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