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Table of Contents

1. Introduction p. 3

2. Motivation p. 5

3. Willingness to Communicate p. 9

4. Conclusions p. 12

References p. 13

Appendix A p. 17

1. Introduction

Marinova et al. (2000) describe the critical period for language acquisition as:

“a period of time when learning a language is relatively easy and typically meets with a high degree of success. Once this period is over, at or before the onset of puberty, the average learner is less likely to achieve nativelike ability in the target language” (p. 9)

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) has powerful innate appeal. It seems to square with the universal experience of learning and L1 as a child, as well as with the difficulty many people have with picking up an L2 in adolescence or adulthood. As many authors have written (Abello-Contesse 2008; Lightbown and Spada 2006; Marinova et al. 2000; Torikai 2006), CPH is widely assumed to be true before discussions of evidence for or against it even begin.

This is probably not an unusual finding anywhere in the world that second languages are taught, but several factors make CPH an especially important force in Japan. First, Japan is host to a large private language academy industry, with 375 billion yen in sales at its peak in 2003 (Clarke 2007). Many of these language schools openly espouse CPH and recruit children even before their first birthdays (Aeon Amity Corporation a; Aeon Amity Corporation b; Jibun Mirai Associe Co. Ltd. 2012). The influence of belief in CPH extends to government policy as well. In 2011, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) made English an official requirement for all 5th and 6th grade elementary school students in Japan, in addition to the 6 years of English instruction already required starting in the first year of junior high school (Kato 2009). This is significant because the introduction of English into elementary schools has not been accompanied by sufficient training of the teachers meant to be carrying out this program (Fennelly and Luxton 2011; Fukada 2011; Kato 2009; Tahira 2011), and junior high and high schools still suffer from the longstanding mismatch between MEXT’s officially stated policy of promoting Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the reality of non-communicative grammar translation classes (Nishino and Watanabe 2008; Tahira 2011).

The age at which students begin English study is being given priority over other issues, quality of instruction among them.

It would be prudent at this point to introduce what research on CPH actually says. Lightbown and Spada (2006) cite studies by Patkowski (1980) among others that seem at first to confirm CPH, in that children learning an L2 almost always did so to native-like levels, whereas adults had greater variety in their levels of success. However, as the authors point out, “age was so closely related to the other factors that it was not really possible to separate them completely” (Lightbown and Spada 2006, p. 70). Jensen (2011) explores phoneme acquisition at a neurological level and concludes that explicit instruction in non-native phonemes can remedy the disadvantages of a lack of early exposure. Muñoz and Singleton (2011), after reviewing numerous studies on the subject, propose that the appearance of CPH may in fact be simply part of a general decline in faculties that every person experiences with age, and highlight the importance of *quality of input* in determining eventual success in a L2 irrespective of at what age learning begins. There are many factors that could affect L2 acquisition that are correlated with age besides physiological development. Further, many of the studies cited in these works were conducted on immigrants living in the L2 community for a number of years, meaning they likely had thousands of hours of L2 use compared to the 35 hours per year mandated for Japanese 5th and 6th graders (Kato 2009) or 140 hours per year for junior high school students (Tahira 2011). What support these studies may provide for CPH is not likely to be relevant to the case presented by most Japanese English learners.

Marinova et al. (2000) attribute misunderstandings on the part of both the general public and researchers to *misinterpretation* of findings on L2 achievement in young learners, *misattribution* of success or failure where it occurs to “the glamour of brain science” (p. 14), and *misemphasis* of failed adult learners over those who succeed. They conclude:

“most adult learners fail to engage in the task with sufficient motivation, commitment of time or energy, and support from the environments in which they find themselves to expect high levels of success.” (p. 27)

The concept of misattribution is crucial, because adults really do experience less success at language learning on average than child learners; it is the reasons for this that are under question. There are many characteristics separating adults learners and child learners that may conspire to give the appearance of a biologically inevitable advantage for young learners. This paper will explore what some of those characteristics are in the particular context of Japan.

2. Motivation

In this section, I will attempt to analyse relevant differences between adult and child learners in the area of motivation. I will draw upon a common classifying scheme for motivation, that of *integrative* and *instrumental* motivation, first described by Gardner and Lambert (1959; 1972). Also, as for the dividing line between adults and children, I will use the start of junior high school to mark the end of childhood for the purposes of this paper. The reason for this is that in Japan junior high school marks a significant change in the role, priorities and day-to-day practice of education in children’s lives; most often this is the first year they are required to wear uniforms, to spend a great deal of time with school-run extracurricular activities such as sports, and according to Kubota (1999) and Takanashi (2004), focus more on memorisation and preparation for exams than self-expression and creativity.

According to Dörnyei (1994), integrative motivation:

“is associated with a positive disposition toward the L2 group and the desire to interact with and even become similar to valued members of that community.” (p. 274)

There are several salient differences between children and adults in Japan where factors making up integrative motivation are concerned. First among these is the idea that

language is closely tied to nationality and race. There is a strong notion of the English language being the property of *inner circle* countries as described by Kachru (1992), and in particular of white people (Butler 2007; Kubota 1999; Kubota and McKay 2009; Seargeant 2009). This is reinforced partly by media depictions but also by the discriminatory hiring practices of language schools themselves (Kubota 1999; Kubota and McKay 2009), as well as advertising from language schools, which stress that students will be taught by “gaikokujin kyōshi” [foreigner teachers], usually portrayed as white (Aeon Amity Corporation a; Jibun Mirai Associe Co. Ltd. 2012). This extends to higher education, where university hiring practices can fall victim to tokenism. As Seargeant says:

“native speaker teachers become specimens of that foreign culture, their role as instructors of specialized knowledge overshadowed by their status as foreign nationals, so that it is the emblematic presence of a foreign culture in the classroom that is the defining factor in their appointment in schools.” (2009, p. 56)

It is not simply English, but there seems to be a common current of certain languages being unsuited to certain races (see Appendix A). An otherwise useful article by Takanashi (2004) includes the Delphic proclamation, “Communication in English, with a Japanese mind, is not easy for Japanese” (p. 11) among other essentialist statements. Integrative motivation may be hard to maintain under the ideology of races owning languages.

Japanese English education may deflect students’ integrative motivation by depicting English in instrumental terms. To be precise, English is portrayed as a tool for explaining Japan to Westerners or as a mirror to improve one’s understanding of Japanese culture. Matsuda (2002) found that junior high school English textbooks located most of their examples of English use in Japan, featuring Japanese English learners interacting with inner circle English speakers. In addition, Japanese high school English textbooks have been found to be a vehicle for Japanese nationalism by presenting Japanese viewpoints as homogeneous and in a dichotomous relationship to those of other countries, making English the means to explain the unified Japanese way of thinking to the outside world (Schneer 2007). Butler (2007) has found strong agreement among

Japanese elementary school teachers with the proposition that learning English can help students to understand Japanese language and culture. Anecdotally, several adult students have told the author on separate occasions that Japanese people need to learn English so that they can explain Japanese culture to foreigners. The presumption that Japanese culture is shared identically and equally with all its members lurks beneath many analyses of education in Japan, a phenomenon which has been critically examined by Kubota (1999). Far from fostering an interest in foreign cultures, this way of thinking turns English into a mere tool for the advancement of a supposedly homogeneous Japanese culture. Because instruction using the above-described contrived scenarios begins in junior high school, when the textbooks cited in Matsuda's (2002) study begin to be used, it is reasonable to expect younger learners not to be familiar with or share these nationalist instrumental attitudes towards English.

Instrumental motivation, defined by Dörnyei (1994) as "related to the potential pragmatic gains of L2 proficiency, such as getting a better job or a higher salary" (p. 274) can be expected to be higher in adults. It is significant, however, that in many cases L2 proficiency is not *directly* tied to these types of social advancement; rather, L2 proficiency as measured by some quantitative means of evaluation is. Because the means of evaluation most commonly used in Japan, the TOEIC (Educational Testing Service 2006; Nihon Eigo Kentei Kyōkai 2012), lacks any writing or speaking component, "learning English" for someone studying for career reasons means a categorically different thing than to someone wanting to communicate with members the L2 community. Furthermore, Childs (1995) has pointed out that TOEIC is not a reliable gauge of individual achievement, being better suited to measure the general aptitude of large groups of people. Thus, what may be mistaken for *instrumental motivation* to learn English in Japanese adults is in actuality motivation to get a high score on a test which ignores speaking altogether and is not designed to gauge English competence in individuals. This

constitutes a large difference not only between adults with integrative motivation and those with instrumental motivation, but also between adults and children.

The conceptualisations of motivation found in *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivational orientations overlap those of *integrative* and *instrumental* quite often. As Dörnyei (1994) says:

Extrinsically motivated behaviours are the ones that the individual performs to receive some extrinsic reward (e.g., good grades) or to avoid punishment. With intrinsically motivated behaviours the rewards are internal (e.g., the joy of doing a particular activity or satisfying one's curiosity). (p. 275).

Of particular interest under this scheme is the concept of learner autonomy, which allows extrinsic motivation to become internalised, according to the work of Deci and Ryan (1985). Self-determined internalisation of values is taken to be superior to externally controlled motivation, but it is important to remember what values are being internalised. In the Japanese education system, English is almost always taught through grammar-translation (Kikuchi and Sakai 2009; Nishino and Watanabe 2008; Tahira 2011; Takanashi 2004), through teacher-fronted classes in which often the students' only vocalisations are repeating example sentences rendered in Japanese phonetic characters called *katakana*. It does not necessarily improve a student's prospects for language mastery if these are the "regulations that are fully assimilated with the individual's other values, needs, and identities" (Dörnyei 1994, p. 276). A student highly motivated to master grammar-translation and *katakana* pronunciation in junior high and high school may be disappointed when those skills are not required in adulthood, unless he or she endeavours to become an English teacher in Japanese schools.

Unfortunately, one lesson a great many Japanese do take to heart from their schooling is that they simply cannot learn English, a state which could be described as *learned helplessness* (Dörnyei 1994, citing Weitner 1992). Junior high and high school students in a survey conducted by Kikuchi and Sakai (2009) reported being demotivated by their English classes' "Test Scores, Noncommunicative Methods, and Teachers'

Competence and Teaching Styles” (p. 197). Schools are not alone in promoting learned helplessness; Japanese culture at large regularly sends the message that *being Japanese* means *being bad at English* (Seargeant 2009). CPH itself and its omnipresence in advertising and other media may also contribute to adults’ belief that they cannot learn a new language because of their age, making CPH a self-fulfilling prophecy. What is an adult to think upon seeing claims that 5 years old is the maximum age to be able to *kikitoru* [*hear/catch*] “English frequencies” (Aeon Amity Corporation b, p. 1)? Because adults, unlike children, have already passed through the education system and have absorbed that much more CPH-reinforcing media, we can expect them to show greater signs of learned helplessness in regards to their ability to learn English.

3. Willingness to Communicate

The following section will examine differences between Japanese children and adults in terms of their willingness to communicate (WTC), using the model proposed by McIntyre et al. (1998). Yashima (2002) has previously used this model to analyse WTC in Japan, finding a strong relationship between WTC and “L2 communication confidence and international posture” (p. 63). Many variables composing WTC, including these ones, in this model will vary between adults and children in Japan, making their quality and quantity of interaction in language classrooms different and potentially offering the appearance of support for CPH.

Among context-dependent variables making up WTC, both *desire to communicate with a specific person* and *state communicative self-confidence* can be seen to be affected by perceptions and stereotypes of the L2 group. The sense that English is somehow in an opposite or antagonistic relationship with Japanese, or that English is the language of the *other* (Kubota 1998; Seargeant 2009) could negatively affect *affiliation* with English speakers, in that they may be perceived as inherently alien. There is reason to expect this

ideologically-based factor in reduced WTC to be stronger in adults; adults are more steeped in the ideology of their home culture than children are.

On the subject of *integrativeness* as a component of WTC, McIntyre et al. (1998)

write:

“A factor that has been shown to predict less contact with the L2 community is fear of assimilation, which is that fear that one will lose his or her feeling of identification and involvement with the L1 community by acquiring a L2.” (p. 552)

This is a well-known disincentive to speak English well in Japanese society.

Students returning to school in Japan after staying in other countries for a length of time may be teased or bullied (McVeigh 2002, pp. 155-156). A Japanese government bureaucrat who spent many years in education and employment in the United States was mistreated and shunned by his coworkers for having picked up too many foreign habits (JPRI Staff and Miyamoto 1995; Miyamoto 1995), meaning that adults are no exception to this xenophobic phenomenon. The threat of appearing too foreign may negatively affect the performance of English students in Japan, particularly those to whom national identity is of great importance.

The *social situation* of the classroom is something we can expect most children to be much more familiar with than adults. Children still engage in much of the normal behaviour of the classroom on a daily basis, and are most likely used to the idea of having homework, listening to directions from the teacher, and being asked to take their pencils out, among other things, and can more easily draw analogies between what their English teacher is asking of them and something similar from their other classes. Also, as Kubota (1999) has pointed out, Japanese elementary school classrooms are much more communicative than their junior high or high school equivalents. We should therefore expect Japanese elementary schoolers to be more comfortable, with less anxiety, in English class than adolescents or adults.

Communicative competence is another area where adults and children are likely to differ. As Kubota (1999) has written, Japanese elementary schools feature much more individual expression than junior high or high schools. At the university level, students can be so reticent to speak that McVeigh has called them not just passive but “unresponsive” (2002, p. 107). Thus, in educational contexts, Japanese children may actually be more communicative than adults. Numerous authors have written that Japanese society does not have the same concept of communication that many other societies do. Takanashi (2004) focuses on cultural differences in communication styles, citing the importance of *uchi* [inside] and *soto* [outside]; *tatemae* [overt] and *honne* [covert] in Japanese culture to explain Japanese students’ difficulties in acclimating to English communication styles. In an article aimed at businessmen communicating internationally, Kameda (2000) makes the point that linguistic competence is less of a problem with Japanese managers than general communicative competence; i.e. English skill alone does not compensate for Japanese managers’ being unable to express themselves clearly in any language. Nakajima (1997) contrasts uncommunicative Japanese with “meddling” (p. 83) Europeans, blaming a need to appear caring and considerate for Japanese unwillingness to voice thoughts and opinions clearly. The same author contrasts adult Japanese with chaotic, wilfully chatty elementary schoolers, matching McVeigh’s (2002) findings. The theories on why Japanese adults tend toward taciturnity vary, but the important fact in regards to this paper is that they agree that Japanese adults do have problems with communication, and that the same cannot be said as strongly of children.

The *intergroup climate*, involving relations between ethnic or national groups, is a variable that positively or negatively can affect adults and children in Japan. In cases the teacher is white and a native English speaker, in other words from one of the inner circle groups that Japanese English learners have exposed to as ideal English speakers, learners’ WTC may be positively affected. On the other hand, a teacher from a less

esteemed ethnic group or country may be undervalued, and his or her students' WTC negatively affected. Kubota and McKay (2009) relate many anecdotes from English learners and teachers which show significant overvaluation of white native speaker teachers and simultaneous denigration of non-native speaker teachers, including Japanese English teachers. While ethnic or national prejudice is also common in children, adults in the community are often the models for this (Gardner 1985).

4. Conclusions

The implications of the CPH hold a great deal of power over educational culture, although evidence for it is far from conclusive. In this paper I have attempted to show that the appearance of support for CPH could be due to great number of other factors. Those include differences in motivation between adults and children, as well as differences in the factors that make up WTC, which can make adults appear less functional in English classes, although they almost universally have more experience with the language than children do. It is to be hoped that the authors of future educational policy will bear in mind that children and adults vary in many ways besides physiological maturity, and that time and efforts spent at lowering the age of introduction to a L2 may be better spent improving the quality of the language education that older students are already receiving.

[3,248 words]

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Appendix A



Cover of Torikai, K. 2006. *Ayaushi! Shōgakkō Eigo* [Danger! Elementary School English].

Tokyo: Bunshun Shinsho.

An English teacher with a stereotypically prominent nose and broken Japanese panics at the sight of his student breaking down in tears.