An Analysis of the ‘Socio-Affective Filter,’ First Language and Cultural Interference among Japanese Students of English

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Scholars in the field of linguistics have for some time been aware of the interrelationship between conscious and subconscious factors in second language acquisition. Research in these fields has led to the postulation of Krashen’s ‘Monitor Theory’ - which posits that adults have two independent systems for developing ability in second language learning.

These are:

a. subconscious language acquisition, and

b. conscious language learning.

Although these systems are interrelated in quite a definite way, it is said that subconscious second language acquisition appears to be the more important of the two. This acquisition is somewhat similar to the process by which children acquire their first language, and in bilingual situations, also their second language. The basic requirement for successful acquisition is said to be that of meaningful interaction in the target language by means of natural communication which is more concerned with the message conveyed than with the form of the utterances. Error correction and the teaching of grammatical rules are said to be almost irrelevant to the process, but native speakers can help the process by simplifying or modifying their utterances.

Fluency in the production of a second language is said to be based on what has been acquired through a series of communicative interactions with native speakers. Any formal or consciously-learnt knowledge of the second language may be utilized to alter the verbal output of the acquired system before or after the utterance

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has been produced. This in essence is one of the fundamental claims of the 'Monitor Theory' - that conscious learning is available to the user only as a 'monitor.'

The distinction between acquisition and learning has provided explanations for what Krashen has described as a “mysterious finding” - that

“both language aptitude as measured by standard language aptitude tests, and Language attitude (affective variables) are related to adult second language Achievement, but are not related to each other.” (1981:p5)

Aptitude is said to be directly related to conscious and unconscious learning while attitude is said to be linked to acquisition.

Carroll has defined aptitude as “the rate at which persons at secondary school, university and adult level learn to criterion.” Aptitude is usually assessed by carefully administered tests - and in recent times through the use of the MLAT (Modern Language Aptitude Test) LAB (Language Aptitude Battery) and the more modern TOIEC and TOEFL testing. These tests are used to measure the learner’s

1. **phonetic coding ability** - the ability to store new sounds in the memory,
2. **grammatical sensitivity** - “the individual’s ability to demonstrate his awareness of the syntactical patterning of sentences in a language” (Carroll, 1973: p7)
3. **inductive ability** - “the ability to examine language material . . and from this to notice and identify patterns, correspondences and relationships involving either meaning or grammatical form” (Carroll, 1973: p8).

Second language aptitude may best be described as the learner’s orientations towards speakers of the second language coupled with certain personality factors.

Krashen (1981) postulated two hypotheses with regard to attitude and aptitude. Regarding aptitude, that it may be directly related to conscious learning, and regarding attitude, that correct attitudinal factors encourage language acquisition on the part of the learner. The pedagogical conclusion which Krashen reached as a result is that attitudinal and activational factors are more important than aptitude in learning a foreign language.

Leading on from this, Krashen also further developed the “Affective Filter” hypothesis postulated by Dulay and Burt (1977) which states that affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process. Research during the past couple of decades has confirmed that a variety of affective variables relate directly to success in
second language acquisition.

Quoting from Stevick (1976) Krashen encapsulated the hypothesis as that which

“captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their Affective Filters” (Krashen, 1982: p 31).

In other words, those learners with incorrect attitudes for second language acquisition will have a high socio-affective filter, and even though they may understand what is being said by a native speaker of the target language, the verbal message may not reach the brain’s appropriate language acquisition device because the “affective filter” will impede it. Conversely, those learners with better attitudes will have more input and a lower filter, resulting in better performance in the second language.

Particularly how these hypotheses relate to the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language in Japan is the subject to which this paper is devoted.

Having spent almost 25 years living and working in Japan, at first as a student of the Japanese language and then teaching English to Japanese students, I have become very aware of the complex problems involved in communication with the Japanese. Complex as the social interaction is between the Japanese themselves, the interaction between Japanese and foreigners is even more complex. The consequences of these encounters can be unexpected and often problematical, mainly because Japanese and non-Japanese so often approach each other, and life in general, with drastically different assumptions and pre-conceptions. The psychic divide between Japanese and non-Japanese (particularly Westerners) has been described as something akin to a minefield. Japanese thought processes and indeed the entire Japanese psyche is so vastly different from that of almost any other race on earth. Therefore, attempting to teach English in this situation presents formidable challenges for the serious TEFL teacher, because apart from the usual problems of a phonetic or first language interference nature, there are specific cultural, socio- and psycholinguistic obstacles to be encountered as well.

Today most Japanese people have at some stage in their lives studied or are studying the English language. The role of English language education in Japan has taken on greater significance as the country has sought to play a greater role in the international community. However, with some exceptions, teaching methodology in secondary education has hardly changed since the days when Commodore Perry of the USA successfully forced the Japanese to end their self-enforced centuries of isolation from the rest of the world in the mid nineteenth century.
Most Japanese children begin to learn English education during the six years of Junior and Senior High School, although many begin before this time. Historically, the Japanese way of teaching English has been based on the Grammar Translation methodology. Grammar and grammatical forms are paramount, coupled with the rote memorization of endless vocabulary. The whole system is geared towards effective results in the university entrance examinations, to the detriment of communicative ability and confidence. Of course, there is a lot more to learning a second language than spending time in a formal classroom situation, learning vocabulary and grammatical forms. Those of us who have successfully learnt a second language, or even a third, know that is virtually impossible to learn to speak the target language without an acquired understanding of the thought processes and value systems of the people who created it.

Having lived and worked in Japan for several decades and observed at close hand the basic insularity and introversion of the Japanese people and their culture, I have come to the conclusion that most Japanese find it practically impossible to develop and real degree of understanding of the psychology of the native English speaking peoples. I believe that this view is reinforced by the fact that in Japan almost invariably, but with a few exceptions, fluent English speakers have lived for some period of time in an English-speaking country. Having said that, it also has to be acknowledged that there are large numbers of Japanese who even having lived abroad for extended periods of time, have returned to Japan with little or no ability in the English language.

There seems to be little hope of a change in this state of affairs without a parallel change in the Japanese cultural psyche, a curious aspect of which is the deep-rooted ambivalence most Japanese still feel towards foreigners and foreign cultures.

Koji Kato, then Chief Researcher at the Japanese National Institute of Education pointed out that

"Japanese culture hasn’t changed a bit - it still persistently keeps anybody different out."

(Time Magazine 13/4/87)

This curious aspect of Japanese culture is a constant source of frustration to foreigners who have lived in Japan for any length of time and who have tried, mostly in vain, to reach out to Japanese people. There almost always seems to be an unseen socio-cultural barrier which in many cases is insurmountable. While this is perhaps beginning to change in some respects, there can be no doubt that many foreign economists, businessmen and politicians would share this view, as we know from recent international events.
Christopher (1984) mentioned a most interesting Japanese government survey taken in the early 1980s which revealed the astonishing statistic that 64% of Japanese people polled flatly declared that they did not wish to associate with foreigners and had no intention of ever doing so. Of the 25% who did express a desire to associate with foreign people, fewer than a sixth, or 40% of the total sample, were actually doing so.

Twenty years after Christopher’s observations, the Asia Times Online reported that

“as a homogenous, insular society, Japan has never been comfortable with Immigration, or even tourism, for that matter. A recent survey (2003) found That one third of Japanese people said they do not want to see an increase in Foreign tourism.” (Asia Times Online December 3rd 2003)

Perhaps some of the reasons for this have been the repeated xenophobic comments which emanate from various right-wing politicians in Japan, coupled with sensational media reporting of rising crimes committed by foreign residents of Japan. The old shimaguni konjou or “island mentality” inherent in the psyche of most Japanese, also encompasses a distrust of foreigners.

Of course, the issue is not clear cut. Japanese feelings towards foreigners are complex, and have been described as

“murkier than a bowl of miso soup”


Weiner gave an interesting example of this when he quoted the example of a Tokyo Nightclub called “Club International” which has a sign outside that reads “No Foreigners Allowed.” Of course, many foreign residents of Japan will tell you that they have never ever, in all their years of living in the country, experienced any problems or negative vibes against them.

Outside of Japan’s borders, similar socio-cultural attitudes are to be found among Japanese expatriates. Surveys taken among the estimated 30,000 resident expatriates lining in the city of New York in 1981 revealed that over 40% of the men had not made any American friends. Furthermore, the expatriates were mostly living in self-imposed “ghetto” areas, where more than one third had never read an American periodical and most spent their free time watching Japanese Cable Television programmes, reading Japanese newspapers, visiting

So far in this paper, we have been examining the Japanese education system and also some of the socio-cultural attitudes of Japanese towards foreigners. We have been doing so in order to ascertain some of the reasons for the high socio-affective filter among Japanese learners of English. We have been seeing that there is a lot more to the problem of course, than the idiosyncrasies of the education system.

In the Introduction to this Paper we mentioned that recent research has confirmed that a variety of affective filter variables relate directly to success in second language acquisition. Broadly, these “affective variables” can be placed in three categories, namely:

1. Motivation
2. Self-confidence
3. Anxiety.

Two types of motivation were posited by Gardner and Lambert (1972) (a) Integrative and (b) Instrumental. **Integrative Motivation** has been defined as a desire to learn a second language in order to “be like” a valued member of the community that speaks the target language. This involves social interaction out of interest in the native speakers and by nature would seem to necessitate a low affective filter. **Instrumental Motivation**, on the other hand, has been defined as a desire to achieve limited fluency or proficiency in the second language for purely utilitarian or practical reasons. Learners only wish to interact with foreign speakers in order to achieve their own selfish ends - there is always a practical purpose in their motivation.

A third type of motivation was posited by Cooper and Fishman (1977) - **Developmental Motivation**, motivation relating to personal satisfaction and personal development. This would include such activities as reading books in English or enjoying English movies.

Perhaps at this point some data from a privately-run English language school in Kyoto might be appropriate and indeed enlightening. The school was established in 1968 and had 700 students who were graded according to the results obtained in an entrance placement test. This was perhaps similar to the kind of tests used in the English Communication Department of Toyo University to grade students according to ability at the commencement of the academic year. The pedagogy of the Kyoto school is that of systematic instruction including pattern practice and aural-oral drilling, and it is based on the integration of the audio-lingual and cognitive
methods under the guidance of Japanese English language specialists - although all the teachers were foreign, native speakers of English. An investigation was carried out to ascertain the attitudes of the students, and the results are said to typify those of many English learners throughout Japan at the time.

When asked the question “what is your purpose for learning English?” the replies were as follows:

- *To be useful in one’s job*: 55%
- *As a cultural achievement*: 26.3%
- *To be useful when traveling abroad or receiving Foreign guests*: 10%
- *No comment*: 8.5%

(Our and Tada, 1978: p 156)

From the results, it can clearly be seen that for the majority of the learners, their motivation was instrumental.

Krashen has correctly pointed out that learners with high motivation generally do better in second language acquisition and that this motivation is usually, but not always, the integrative variety. We have already seen that for most Japanese learners of English, this integrative motivation is sadly lacking and that their motivation is more usually purely instrumental.

Personality factors are interrelated with motivational factors, and it has been hypothesized that the self-confident or secure person will be more able to encourage second language intake and will also have a lower affective filter. Between Japan and the West, there is a vast difference in the concept of self and indeed everything which surrounds self. In Western societies the concept of self has its roots in the Judeo-Christian traditions which begin with the conflict of self-assertion as it seeks knowledge through eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden stories in the Bible. Many of the fundamental tenets of Western society today have their origins in the Judeo-Christian Bible, which has been translated into many languages and has a world-wide influence on many cultures and peoples. Consequently the word, be it written or spoken, is very important and taken literally in the English language. In contrast, the concept of self in Japanese society in particular and Oriental/Asian society in general has its roots firmly entrenched in Buddhism and Confucianism. Knowledge or “enlightenment” in the Buddha came not through self-exertion or self-assertion, but through a long struggle, training and through meditation which ended in a state of harmony. It is an interesting fact that the words of the Buddha as found in the Buddhist Scriptures and sutras cannot be either read or understood by most Japanese, and they do not mind...
about this, so although the word is important in Western thought, it is *form* or appearance that is more important to the Japanese. Perhaps this could be one of the reasons why the Japanese language is so vague when compared to English, because non-verbal communication among Japanese is often more important than words.

“Form” to the Japanese is not necessarily objective or logical but rather is connected with a subjective awareness of the speaker and his relationship with the person to whom he is speaking. In Japanese thought *harmony* is essential to existence, and explicit, careful reasoned statements or plain speaking which could lead to confrontation are things to be avoided at all costs. The Japanese dread confrontation of any sort - either verbal or non-verbal. In fact, it has been said that Japanese people would prefer if possible to avoid verbal communication entirely. Such proverbs as “words are the root of all evil” would tend to support such a notion.

The third affective variable posited in the *affective filter hypothesis* is that of the anxiety factor. It has been said that low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety. Dulay and Burt (1977) have also hypothesized that the “affective filter” acts to prevent second language input being used for language acquisition. They have also suggested that those language acquirers with optimal attitudes towards learning a second language have low affective filters. Stevick (1976) has also pointed out that those classroom situations which encourage low filters are those which promote low anxiety among students and keep them “off the defensive.” Unfortunately, the situation existing in most Japanese schools and even in university English classes is just the opposite.

In the Japanese educational system, individualism and individual concepts have traditionally been discouraged, as in the proverb “the nail that sticks up will be hammered down.” Coupled with that, we have observed how the examination orientated system, particularly with regard to English teaching methodologies, has contributed to negative ability in spoken Japanese and indeed high anxiety levels. As a result, Japanese university students emerging from this background find it difficult to adjust to a classroom situation where individual performance is given much more credit. Allowances and adjustments have to be made on both sides to cope with this. The students have to learn to adjust to the new, relaxed, individual-response situation and the teacher has to work hard to make the classes interesting, enjoyable and above all, relaxed.

This is particularly important in the Japanese university classroom. The students have all come through the uniquely Japanese rite of passage known as “examination hell.” Now they have entered a period of relative ease, a moratorium period in which practically anything goes. This is sandwiched between the “examination hell” period and the post-graduation “society hell” or socio-economic rat race which they will all enter. Nagai (1971) has some interesting observations about this period in the lives of young Japanese.
“Instead of well-balanced education, one-sided emphasis on college preparatory education is obvious at all levels of schooling throughout the country. The personality of Japanese students tends to be compartmentalized, such that only the side directed toward the entrance examination is strengthened. Upon entrance to universities, the student suddenly demands the recovery of his total personality. This claim seldom seems to be fully understood by the adults, whether professor or parents.” (Nagai, 1971: p255)

Rapid social change in 21st Century Japan, coupled with the implosion of the “Bubble” economy in the 1990s and the resultant economic depression which has lasted for more than a decade, has resulted in further pressures on Japanese university students. They know that employment opportunities, and indeed the old “lifetime employment” enjoyed by their parents, no longer exists. They also know that ability in the English language is a pre-requisite to success in many fields, and is becoming more and more important to finding a secure future. These add to the anxiety factor among the students.

All of these affective variables, as the affective filter hypothesis states, have a bearing on success in second language acquisition. The student who feels at ease in the classroom and indeed has positive attitudes towards classroom and teacher should do better in the second language. Krashen (1981) has noted that these positive attitudes may also be manifestations of the learners’ self-confidence and/or integrative motivation, and for this reason may relate to acquisition.

Scholars such as Naimon et al (1978) during their study of French as a second language in Toronto found that the students’ general attitude towards the classroom and the teacher was in fact the best predictor of success in both acquisition and learning. These findings would also be similar to the Japanese students’ situation. All of the factors we have examined would tend to both confirm and explain the reasons for a high “affective filter” among Japanese students of English.

This section will deal briefly with the role of the Japanese language and culture in English language acquisition.

Francis Xavier, the sixteenth century Jesuit missionary to Japan, is reputed to have coined the phrase that the Japanese language was “the devil’s language.” Few Westerners who have tried to master it would argue with that description, and the Japanese themselves have been known to refer to their mother tongue using the same
words. Philologists say that Japanese belongs to the Altaic group of languages - which includes Korean, Mongolian and Turkish. This relationship is quite tenuous. The result is that when the average Westerner begins to study Japanese, he finds that it has practically nothing in common with his own language. This therefore makes Japanese difficult to learn, but the reverse is true for Japanese people trying to learn English, or indeed any other foreign language. Japanese is the perhaps the only world language which utilizes three “alphabets” and that in itself is a linguistic nightmare for the prospective foreign student.

While the pronunciation of Japanese is not particularly difficult for foreign learners, the absence of the consonants “l” and “v” creates obvious difficulties for Japanese in learning other languages. In an investigation into the difficulties encountered by Japanese people in the pronunciation and grammar of English, Cairns (1977) rightly points out that where these phonemes are of functional significance, failure to pronounce them properly can and does lead to unintelligibility. Japanese does not contain the lateral phoneme /l/, and it was interesting to note that all of Cairns’ informants talked about it as being one of their biggest problems. I would agree with Cairns’ view that this

“is a problem which an English teacher must face, since failure to articulate properly or the tendency to substitute some other sound can make the utterance unintelligible.” (Cairns, 1977 :p11)

The problem of the phoneme /l/ and its allophonic variations means that Japanese speakers inevitably substitute for /l/ their own voiced alveolar flap /ɾ/ so that it becomes impossible, apart from the context, to know whether some Japanese speakers are saying “light” or “right,” etc. Dental fricatives also do not appear in Japanese and while the articulation of these is no problem for the Japanese learner when articulated in isolation, in combination with other words - irrespective of whether they appear initially, medially or finally - there are problems. There is a tendency among Japanese students of English to substitute the alveolar fricatives of English, possibly because of the influence of English loanwords as taught by Japanese High School teachers using the Katakana-style pronunciation method. Thus the expression “they thanked God” in English can sound like “they sang to God” when pronounced by a Japanese student of English. However, is perfect pronunciation really necessary? So long as the utterance is intelligible, then perfect pronunciation should not matter so much.

The fact that Japanese culture and ways of thinking are so different from those of English-speaking peoples has a direct effect on the differences between the two languages. The grammatical contrast has been taken to imply a national contrast between Japanese and Westerners. It has been said that the readiness of English speakers to place the verb straight after the subject and expose it in its affirmative and present indicative form (as in the sentence “This is a book”) implies that Westerners are blunt, direct and possibly impatient. In Japanese, the
word order is different, with the verb coming at the end of the sentence, as in “Kore wa hon desu” - etymologically translated as: “Kore wa -this, hon - book, desu - is.” With the verb coming at the end of the sentence, it seems as if the Japanese prefer to hold their minds in a state of openness and suspense, to hear all the facts of the case before coming to a definite conclusion. Therefore we could conclude that while Westerners may be direct and impatient, the Japanese may be regarded as patient, but devious.

From the same sentence we can learn that in Japanese there is no article -either definite or indefinite. We know that in English the article is essential because most English speakers are by nature precise, and not vague, in character. Native speakers of English need to know what kind of noun is the noun in question. In the case of abstract nouns or proper names they are content to omit the use of the article - but the Japanese do that in all situations because by nature of their cultural identity, they are vague and imprecise. The distinction between the definite and the indefinite is left undefined, leaving an aura of mystery, and this is something that they seem to delight in. Through this, we can glimpse something of their whole attitude to life and indeed language. Perhaps we can only fully appreciate and understand this phenomenon when our study of a foreign language includes something of the culture and psyche of the people whose native tongue it is.

The number of foreign loan words in the modern Japanese language also leads to obvious difficulties when it comes to proper English pronunciation of these words, and this is worsened by the overuse of Katakana in Japanese produced English language textbooks as used in Junior and Senior High Schools. In addition, the over-emphasis on grammar/translation methodology means that Japanese students, by the time they reach university level, are more or less “programmed” to translate directly from one language to the other. This causes endless headaches for the foreign teacher in the TEFL classroom.

Within the limitations of this paper I have tried to examine some of the reasons for the apparent high “affective filter” among Japanese students of the English language. The study has included aspects of the Japanese education system, together with certain socio- and psycholinguistic elements of Japanese culture and the problems of interference from the psyche of the Japanese language and culture.

The sad fact remains that despite all the time, money and energy spent in English teaching in Japan, despite large numbers of Japanese people having more opportunities to travel and live abroad, despite Japanese linguistic experts and teachers keeping abreast of developments in pedagogical methodologies and despite the efforts of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture to review the English education curricula in schools,
the end product remains in many cases far from satisfactory. There can be no doubt that the system as it currently stands has failed to produce enough good English speakers, apart from a few exceptions.

We have observed that the grammar-translation method of teaching employed in Japan’s schools and colleges, (despite recent brave attempts to make the curricula more communicative orientated) coupled with the examination-orientated nature of the education system, has been responsible for producing a majority of linguistic robot-like university students who have some knowledge of English grammar and an inflated vocabulary of English words, but who cannot carry on an adequate conversation in English. Clearly, the problem requires radical action if the situation is to be improved or remedied.

In recent times there has been an ongoing debate about whether or not English should be introduced into Japanese elementary schools. There are strong viewpoints on either side of the debate. Of course, it makes good sense to begin the study of a second language as early in life as possible. Outside of the formal educational institutions, many Japanese parents recognize this fact and are keen to pay large sums of money for their children to learn English at private language schools.

Perhaps one of the greatest failures in the Japanese system in relation to English language education is the fact that in the universities and colleges little distinction is made between literature, language and language teaching. The result is that many professors are mostly literature specialists who look on English as an art for, to the detriment of communicative English competency among their students. As a result, many graduates are not fully prepared to become English teachers, and they in turn get caught up in the grammar-translation methodology and the inevitable pressure of “examination hell” which they themselves experienced. So the vicious cycle is repeated, and no real progress appears to be made in bringing about real change in many institutions. A dramatic and meaningful re-appraisal of the whole scenario is vital in order to remedy this state of affairs.

Some of the changes which I believe are necessary would be:

1. changing the curriculum for English teaching yet again to make it less examination orientated and more geared towards communicative competence;
2. re-assessing the present methods of teacher-training and making appropriate changes such as demanding that all prospective teachers are required to spend at least one year, but possible two, abroad in an English-speaking country; and
3. implementing culture studies or comparative culture studies as a much more integrated and organized part of the foreign language curriculum.
I firmly believe that especially in the case of Japan a particular effort needs to be made in these areas, because of the existence of strong ethnocentrism among the Japanese people. In the 21st century it is more important than ever for the Japanese people to realize that they can no longer retreat into the isolationism of their island home. Japan is a major player on the international scene, and its politicians have aspirations to take an even greater role in the future, for example with Japan becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council. This necessitates an urgent need for even more “internationalization” in Japan. Peterson concluded that

“the difficulties that the Japanese have in speaking English may be strongly cultural in origin rather than linguistic.” (Peterson, 1978: 31)

Therefore, a much stronger emphasis on cultural studies may be part of the solution to the problem. Perhaps some or all of these suggestions could help in lowering the affective filter among Japanese students of English. It is through studies of comparative culture, incorporated into foreign language studies, that the Japanese can come to a deeper understanding of themselves and their national identity. In the mirror of another nation and another language they may arrive at a deeper knowledge of the humanity of which they are a part, and through the study not only of foreign words, but the mind-set, culture and beliefs behind those words in the inner recesses of the human mind, they may yet fully find their niche in the international scene as communicatively competent speakers of English, the global language.

References


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