

Bilingualism to Japanese Late L2 Learners of English

Yukiko Mimoto

SLS 380

November 27, 2013

Introduction

Bilingualism is the ability to use two or more languages effectively and appropriately for authentic personal, educational, social or work related purposes. According to Butler and Hakuta (2004), bilingualism is a complex psychological and sociocultural linguistic behavior which has many dimensions. Many people around the world consider competency in two or more languages to be an issue of considerable political, economic, cultural and personal significance (Birdsong, 1999). Some issues surrounding bilingualism are however considered as problems which need to be solved while others are viewed as challenges which can be mastered for the benefit of the individual, community or even the nation in which they live. In this paper I discuss how late Japanese learners of English as a second language perceive bilingual and the possibility of their being successful in learning and gaining fluency in using English as a second language. The research will use a mixed research methodology using qualitative information found on websites, scholarly journals, academic papers and scholarly articles along with quantitative research data collected using questionnaires to examine the bilingual perception of late Japanese English learners and the effect of age on the ability of Japanese learners in acquiring English as a second language.

Literature Review

Factors Promoting the Acquisition of New Languages for Japanese Learners

The need to know two or more languages is not new. Many historical records show that several individuals and communities around the world have felt compelled to learn other languages for various reasons such as intermarriage, education, trade, colonization and language contact (Birdsong, 1999). Historical patterns and current changes in the modern world have presented new incentives for learning additional languages for several reasons.

To begin with, the growth in business and commerce over the last few years which has been characterized by unprecedented rates of internationalization of industrial and white collar businesses such as the automotive industry in Japan has increased the demand to perform business in both local and regional languages. Business traders have to learn other languages for them to remain competitive in their trade zones. According to Butler and Hakuta (2004), recent developments in e-commerce have created the need for proficiency in many languages since the internet facilitates the availability of global communication for both personal and commercial reasons. This has particularly created the need for one to be proficient in English to conduct trade over the internet. Economic globalization which comes with global communication has also created the need for proficiency in regional languages. English domination in the internet has paved way for a stronger presence of regional and local languages with increased electronic commerce trade in the local and regional markets.

The voluntary migration of people from one country to another which is occurring at a high rate for cultural, educational, political and economic reasons has also increased the need to learn other languages. According to Hammers and Blanc (2000), the acquisition of a new language is embedded in many cultural and ethnic groups and values and thus the acquisition of a second language can be viewed as an acculturation process. Through interactional with many cultural and ethnic linguistic groups, bilingual individuals can develop unique cultural and ethno linguistic identities separate from those of monolinguals.

There is also reduced dominance of certain languages with increased preservation and promotion of indigenous languages in many regions as they acquire other essential national and regional languages. According to Rohrer (2011), Japanese learning institutions play an important role in the provision of bi and multilingual skills which are becoming increasingly necessary in

the modern world. Various education programs whose primary goal is language learning have been developed to provide competency in certain languages. Student in bilingual programs speaking dominant societal languages usually develop similar language proficiency than those that use the first language as the exclusive medium of communication. As asserted by Birdsong (1999), though there can be a lag in the development of the Japanese first language skills among students in the initial years of bilingual programs where academic instructions use the English second language, parity with students instructed in the first language can be achieved after one year of receiving the language instructions in the first language.

Factors Influencing Second Language Acquisition for Japanese Learners

There are various factors which influence second language acquisition for Japanese learners. Using the target language is one of the major objectives in learning second language for many second language learners (Yashima, 2002). Motivation is one of the most essential elements of learning. According to Matsumoto & Obana (2001) and Ushioda (2001), most Japanese English second language learners are motivated by education, trade and career goals to learn English. The learning of second languages varies in many Japanese learners due to several dimensions such as age, aptitude, learning styles, motivation and personality. According to Rohrer (2011) and Macintyre, Baker, Clement and Conrod (2001), social factors can make the acquisition of second languages more challenging to some Japanese people. For instance, outgoing people tend to acquire second languages more easily than shy people since they are more willing to communicate even when they are not sure of being successful. Shy people on the other hand fear communicating incorrectly and thus do not utilize opportunities which they could use in facilitating learning.

Another topic of increased research attention in the study of language learning is the role of language anxiety. Flege & Liu (2001) suggest that the ability of Japanese English second language learners to speak in English is limited by their perception accuracy on their ability to speak fluently in English. As argued by Cutrone (2001), Japanese English second language learners experience a lot of difficulty when asked to perform oral tasks in English classes due to their lack of confidence in their ability to communicate well in English.

The rationale behind integration of the English language and academic instruction in Japanese bilingual immersion programs is to take the advantage of a child's natural ability to learn language which occurs through authentic communication with others. According to Peacock & Ho, (2003), over the past few years, research in the acquisition of second languages has been primarily focused on learner-centered approaches to second language teaching in order to enhance the ability of learners to acquire second languages independently. There has also been a shift of attention from the products of language learning to the processes through which learning takes place. Brain activity diminishes with age which reduces one's ability to learn a second language as one becomes older (Hell & Tokowicz, 2008). According to Birdsong (1999), it is widely hypothesized that young aged people are in a better position to learn second languages. Younger Japanese learners tend to fit more suitably in second language immersion programs. Early learning of the English second languages also facilitates an attitude of openness to new languages and cultures and increases the opportunity for longer learning exposure. Second language acquisition pedagogies tend to be more effective in young students when used with effective learning strategies.

The acquired second language diminishes with time if the second language is not used. As argued by Optiz (2011), simultaneous maintenance of several languages by a bilingual can

result in tradeoffs between those languages due to dynamic interactions between languages which results into different outcomes in different people. People who do not use their learned second languages such as English experience challenges in remembering some words and phrases and their use at the correct instances in conversation. Mastery of English grammatical structures also diminishes with time if the acquired second language is not used.

The acquisition of a second language may also result to some few changes in the Japanese first language which may arise due to identification with new communities. The reduction in one's proficiency in the Japanese first language for instance due to migration to a different region may facilitate improvement in the second language (Optiz, 2011). Acquiring the English second language can significantly affect ones personality. According to Kashima, Halloran, Masaki & Kashima (2004), language affects the personality of an individual by influencing several aspects of character such as feelings, thoughts and actions and hence language shifts can change thought patterns and in turn affect one's personality. Language shifts also affects emotional expression. For instance, it increases one's ability to express embarrassing topics in a second language.

Research questions

In carrying out this research, I aimed at identifying the definition of bilingual to late Japanese English second language learners, their attitudes in acquiring English as a second language, the challenges they face in learning English, their motivations and possibility in successfully acquiring English as a second language. My research is thus based on the following research questions:

1. What is the definition of bilingual to late Japanese English second language learners?

2. What are the attitudes of late Japanese English second language learners towards English acquisition as a second language?
3. What challenges do late Japanese English second language learners face?
4. What are the motivations of late Japanese learners to learn English?
5. What is the possibility of a late Japanese learner in successfully acquiring English as a second language?

Methodology

Data collection

I used a mixed research methodology which involved qualitative data collection and analysis. As shown by Creswell (2012), a mixed research design is a procedure for data collection, analysis and use of both qualitative methods in a single study so as to understand a research problem. During the research, I asked specific narrowed down questions using questionnaires in order to collect primary data from seven participants and later analyzed the data along with past research in the same field to enhance a better understanding the research problem.

Participants

I had seven research participants for the purpose of the research study. Not all the research respondents were late English second language learners so as to enable the comparison analysis of the effect of time in the acquisition of English as a second language in Japanese learners. Two began learning English at an early age. Five of the research respondents were female while two were male. Three of the research respondents studied at Kapli'oni community college while two were University of Hawaii students and the other two were working.

One of the research participants, Aya started studying English when she was four years old which means she is not a late English second language learner. Aya came from Hawaii and

started studying at the University of Hawaii around 5 years ago. Though she speaks English with a Japanese accent, her English is very fluent. My goal for learning English is to be able to speak like her. I was surprised to hear that she sometimes hesitated to speak English since she has a lot of friends who are native English speakers and her attitude toward learning English seemed very positive.

Mayu was another research respondent who was also an early English learner who began studying English at five years old. Mayu came to the US about 12 years ago. After she graduated from University in mainland U.S., she moved to Hawaii and started working as an architect. Her English is like that of a native and I totally agree with her idea that she is a bilingual person.

Shinobu was another research respondent who started studying English in February 2011 and is thus a late English learner. Shinobu studies at Kapli'oni community college and her husband is a native English speaker. She seems to talk freely with native English speakers and thus I did not know why she did not have confidence in speaking English.

Makiko was another research respondent who started studying English when she was 23 years old. Makiko goes to Kapli'olani community college. I am learning Hula dance with her. My Hula teacher who is a native English speaker relies on her to interpret what the teacher said in English to Japanese since most Hula students are Japanese and some do not have enough ability to communicate in English. Though her fluency in English shows she is a bilingual, she answered that she was not but said that she had a very positive attitude to learn English unlike many Japanese students around the college and University.

Another research participant is Noboru who is my father and has never lived abroad but often goes on business trips to many countries whereby he communicates with his clients in English. Noboru started studying English when he was 24 years old. Contrary to my expectation

that he is a very self-confident person, he didn't take himself as a bilingual and he didn't have a positive attitude towards English learning. Another participant, Raimu is a University of Hawaii student in Global Environmental Science. He started studying English when he needed to enter college in the U.S. Though I assumed that he would answer that he does not have a positive attitude towards learning English as a second language since I perceive him to be a shy person, I was surprised he didn't.

Tomoe was the last research participant who goes to Kapi'olani community college. She started studying English 10 years ago when she was a college student in Japan when she had an opportunity to study English in Wisconsin. Six months later, she had to go back to Japan by the time she got used to English and decided to go to a private English school to maintain her English skills. I did not have opportunities to hear her English so often but I think she has a high English ability since she takes English classes with native English speakers at a college. However, she answered that she does not think she is a bilingual. Many of the participants like her didn't think they are bilingual. I think this results show the typical personality of Japanese people.

Results

Definition of Bilingual to Japanese English Learner

Aya perceives bilingual as the ability to interpret instantly, convey thoughts and feelings in both languages so as to enhance deep understanding of cultural backgrounds of the languages. Mayu perceives bilingual as people who can speak, read and write in at least two languages in everyday conversation levels without any difficulties. Shinobu on perceives bilingual as someone who speaks two languages fluently without any foreign accent. Makiko on the other hand perceives bilingual as the ability to speak, understand, write and read two different languages

especially with equal or nearly equal fluency. Noboru perceives bilingual as a person who can communicate with people who speak a language that is not their mother tongue without any difficulty. Raimu perceives bilingual as a person who can understand and speak two different languages at the same level as a native speaker without problems in conversation. Tomoe perceived bilingual as a person who can comprehend and especially speak two different languages fluently.

Perception of Japanese English learners as a bilingual

Aya did not perceive herself as a bilingual person since she cannot think or feel in using English as a second language as the first language. She also feels that she cannot speak the English second language as she speaks in the first Japanese language. Mayu considered herself to be a bilingual person since she fits her description of a bilingual person. Shinobu did not consider herself to be a bilingual since she experiences difficulty at times to speak and have conversations in English. She felt that her English has a strong Japanese accent and her grammar was not perfect. Makiko was sure that she was not a bilingual person since her ability to speak English was only 30% of her Japanese first language. Noboru did not perceive himself as a bilingual since he sometimes cannot communicate or negotiate with his foreign clients as he wishes to. Raimu does not perceive himself to be a bilingual person since though he did not have any problems to speak in Japanese in a conversation, he is uncomfortable when using English and sometimes cannot understand and cannot tell what he wants to say. Tomoe did not perceive herself to be bilingual since her skills in English were not equivalent to her proficiency in the Japanese language. She relied on Japanese most of the time except when speaking simple English sentences which she uses often.

Challenges experienced by Japanese English learners in learning English

Aya identified phonetics and lexicon as her major challenges in learning English. Phonetics is the ability to recognize the difference between an L and an R so as to pronounce vowels and constant properly while lexicon is the ability to memorize new words and increase vocabularies. Mayu asserted that she had difficulties in grammar and writing in English. Shinobu experienced difficulties when speaking English in front of people expect her friends. For instance, she said that she did not like to give class presentations, participate in group discussions or say her opinion in class. The most difficult aspect that Makiko experienced in learning English is pronunciation. She also felt that her listening ability was also very limited due to her late acquisition of English. She also had difficulties building appropriate English sentences with the same structure as that of native English speakers. Noboru experienced difficulties in acquiring new words and phrases. Raimu experienced difficulty in memorizing vocabularies and idioms and also in pronunciation. Tomoe said that she experienced many difficulties in learning English and made a lot of mistakes while speaking or writing in English especially in tenses which cause her to mix up.

Attitudes of Japanese English learners towards learning English

Aya said that she tried using second and third languages as much as she could but hesitated to use them at times because of being afraid of making mistakes and feeling ashamed of asking too much questions. Mayu felt that she previously had a positive attitude in English in school since she used it daily to communicate with others but presently does not feel like learning it. Shinobu said that her attitude in learning English was not very positive since she is shy and did not have confidence to talk or speak in English especially when speaking to young native English speakers. Makiko felt that she tries to have a positive attitude for instance by

speaking to classmates as many times as possible in English and trying to be positive English acquisition outside the school for instance in stores and buses. Noboru felt that he does not have a positive attitude towards learning English. Raimu felt that he was comfortable when learning English in an English class but experienced difficulties in regular classes. Tomoe did not perceive herself as having a positive attitude towards learning English since she avoids using it in front of people when she possible can. She is also afraid of making mistakes which make her unconfident when communicating with others especially with people who speak fluently in English.

Motivation of Japanese English learners

Aya considered English as an indispensable tool for her future job. She considered it as very essential to enable her to achieve both her academic and career goals and improve her language and communication skills. Mayu's motivation in learning English is due to her difficulties in grammars and writing and thus she tried to study with text books and read English books and newspapers but she was not sure whether it worked well for her since she still makes many mistakes but still, she thinks it helped since she has improved a lot in writing emails at work and forced herself to write in a proper way. Shinobu said that she was motivated to learn English since she thinks that English is a tool which can enable her accomplish higher goals in the future. Makiko was motivated by her written notes and memos in English since she started to study English which she believes works well for her. For Noboru, he was motivated to learn English for the purpose of business only. Noboru now feels no need for learning it and does not have a strategy when he was studying it, he did not have a specific strategy. Raimu was motivated by the need to use English to excel in classes and converse with his friends. Tomoe's motivation to learn English is thorough persistent practice.

Discussion

Most of the research respondents considered bilingual as a person who can speak and write fluently in two languages except for Makiko who perceived bilingual as the ability to speak, understand, write and read two different languages especially with equal or nearly equal fluency. All of the research respondents did not consider themselves to be bilingual except Mayu. English phonetics, pronunciation, lexicon, tenses, grammar and writing as well pronunciation, listening, acquisition of new words and phrases, memorization of vocabularies and idioms, speaking in front of people and writing are the major challenges which research respondents have in acquiring English as a second language. According to Van Hell and Tokowicz (2010), age has an effect on Japanese second language learner's ability in successfully acquiring English as a second language. Mayu was not a late English second language learner and she considers herself as a successful bilingual. Aya on the other hand is also not a late English second language learner. The only reason she does not consider herself to be a bilingual is because her ability to use English is not equal to her ability to use Japanese. This affirms Birdsong (1999) view that "The age at which a person starts learning a second language corresponds in some way to the ultimate success that the person will attain after years of having used that language." (p. 162). Kashima, Halloran and Kashima argue that personality has a great effect in the acquisition of English as a second language among late Japanese English second language learners. All of the research respondents did not have a positive attitude towards learning English mostly because of being afraid of making mistakes in front of people which explains the challenge of them having confidence in talking in English in front of people as earlier discussed.

According to Rohrer (2011), language has an effect on personality. Education, the need for communication and socialization with native English speakers, jobs and career endeavors and

personal aims to achieve goals in future formed the major motivation in learning English as a second language among the research respondents. As argued by Butler and Hakuta (2004), developments in electronic commerce have necessitated proficiency in many languages due to the availability of global communication via the internet which has created the need for learning English. For Noboru, he was motivated to learn English for the purpose of business only which affirms that globalization of world trade motivated late Japanese English learners to gain fluency in English.

Conclusion

Bilingualism has been promoted by the increased globalization in business trade and e-commerce, migration and increased need to acquire further education. Bilingual competence which is the ability to use target languages effectively and appropriately for authentic personal, education and social purposes reduces with age and decrease in the amount of time of exposure to the second language. Younger Japanese people have a higher ability to learn second languages than old people and therefore, second language acquisition programs tend to be more successful in younger people. Age diminishes brain activity which reduces the ability of older Japanese people to learn new languages. English phonetics, pronunciation, lexicon, tenses, grammar and writing as well pronunciation, listening, acquisition of new words and phrases, memorization of vocabularies and idioms, speaking in front of people and writing are the major challenges which late Japanese English learners have in acquiring English as a second language.

References

- Birdsong, D. (Eds.). *Second language acquisition and the critical period hypothesis*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Butler, Y.G., & Hakuta, K. (2006). *Bilingualism and second language acquisition*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Creswell, J. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Cutrone, P. (2001). Learner attitudes towards EFL teachers in an English conversation in Japan. *The language teacher* 24, 21-24.
- Flege, J.E., & Liu, S. (2001). The effect of experience on adult's acquisition of a second language. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 23, 527-552.
- Hammers, J.F., & Blanc, M.H. (2000). *Bilinguality and bilingualism*, 2nd edition. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press.
- Kashima, E. E., Halloran, M., Masaki, Y., & Kashima, Y. (2004). The effects of personal and collective mortality salience on individualism: Comparing Australians and Japanese with higher and lower self-esteem. *Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(3), 384-392.
- Macintyre, P.D., Baker, S.C., Clement, R., & Conrod, S. (2001). Willingness to communicate, social support and language-learning orientations of immersion students. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 23, 369-388.
- Matsumoto, M., & Obana, Y. (2001). Motivational factors and persistence in learning Japanese as a foreign language. *New Zealand journal of Asian studies*, 3(1), 59-86.
- Optiz, C. (2011). *First language attrition and second language acquisition in a second language environment*. University of Dublin.

Peacock, M., & Ho, B. (2003). Student language learning strategies across eight disciplines.

International journal of applied linguistics, 13, 179-200.

Rohrer, S. B. (2011). Why Do Japanese People Not Speak English? Japanese Elementary

Students in a Bilingual School (2011). *Master of Education Theses*. Paper 35. Retrieved

6th November 2013 from

http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/education_theses/35

Ushioda, E. (2001). *Language learning at university: Exploring the role of motivational thinking*.

Honolulu: University of Hawaii.

Van Hell, J.G., & Tokowicz, N. (2008). Event related brain potentials and second language

learning: Syntactic processing in late L2 learners at different L2 proficiency levels.

Second language research, 26(1), 43-74.

Yashima, T. (2002). Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL

context. *The modern language journal*, 86(1), 54-66.