

EFL Learning Ability Self-Assessments of Japanese EFL Students

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If modesty is a virtue, then Japanese college students tend to be virtuous, at least, or especially, with respect to their foreign language learning potential. Consistently, large majorities describe themselves as having little aptitude for English (Burden, 2002), and, as will be suggested below, as being “below average” language learners. If these self-reports reflect actual self-beliefs then there are very likely to be motivational implications (Weiner, 2001). Students who believe that they are below average in their ability to learn English for example, may decide that there is no point in trying, or they may calculate that they will need to invest more time and effort than they can afford or are willing to. While the precise relationships between self-assessments, motivation, and achievement have yet to be elucidated, it is difficult to doubt that a belief that one cannot do something will have a deleterious effect on one’s decision to expend time and resources attempting to do it (Brown, 2003b).

Japanese are known to value modesty (*kenson*) and moderateness (*hikaeme*). Self-effacing self-descriptions (rating oneself as low on a positive characteristic for example, or as lower than average) are probably viewed as more modest by Japanese, and a number of studies have shown that Japanese respondents tend to use the middle parts of Likert scales more than do North Americans (Brown, 2003c; Brown & Ferrara, 2003; Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995; Reid, 1990). If they do, then Japanese base rates for positive items will be lower relative to North American base rates for equivalent items and self-ratings for an item of interest must be interpreted relative to the base rate. With this in mind, I conducted two short studies. The first was designed to determine whether student self-ratings are dangerously low (in a motivational sense) within the specific domain of foreign language learning abilities (FLLA) The second was designed to determine whether they appear lower than they actually are as a result of the self-effacing tendency mentioned above.

Study 1

Method

Participants

All participants were 210 first-year Japanese college students (143 males, 67 females, mean age = 18.5), majoring in information sciences, enrolled in compulsory introductory English classes, at a certain mid-sized university in the Tokyo area. Studies were conducted during the Spring 2002 (Study 1) and Fall 2002 (Study 2) terms. Participation was voluntary and students were neither informed nor deceived about the purpose of the studies.

Instrument

During the first week of the term, students completed a battery of questionnaires concerning their attitudes, beliefs, values, and goals with respect to foreign language education and to English in particular. Embedded among the several instruments were a number of commonly used personality indexes, including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale. These data are discussed in Brown (2003a). The particular item of present relevance was one that asked the students to assess their own foreign language learning ability (FLLA), relative to that of their peers, on a scale ranging from 1 (*very much below average / heikinyori totemo zutto shita*.) to 8 (*very much above average / heikinyori totemo zutto ue*). All scale steps were explicitly labeled. No neutral option was provided. (Item and scale are contained in appendix.)

Results

I treated the data as interval level and conducted a single-sample *t* test against the hypothetical scale midpoint of 4.5. The mean self-rating ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.46$) differed significantly from the midpoint ($t(210) = 15.26$, $p < .0001$). Examination of the data at the categorical level revealed that among the 15% (31) who rated themselves above average in foreign language learning ability, the majority (68%) rated themselves as only slightly above average (scale step 5) and none as far above average (scale steps 7 or 8). Among the 85% (179) who rated themselves below average, all four of the sub-average rating steps were selected with about equal frequency. (44, 43, 42, and 50, respectively, for scale steps 1-4). This distribution of above average to below average self-ratings, treated dichotomously differed from chance by a considerable degree ($\chi^2(1, N = 210) = 57.95$, $< .0001$).

As noted above, the female students as a group had more foreign travel experience, during which they may have used, or had opportunities to use, English. The data do not permit us to say what their reaction to that was, but in any event, the females rated their FLLA, while still below average, somewhat *less* below average than the males ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.34$, and $M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.49$ respectively), $t(210) 2.25$, $p < .03$.

Study 2

Do students think that they are below average specifically in FLLA or do they view themselves in a globally self-effacing manner, as the majority of studies conducted in the past seem to indicate (Heine, 2003). Such a tendency could indicate either a modest response style (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995; Kurman, & Sriram, 2002), or a general lack of positive feelings of self-worth (Brown & Dutton, 1995), rather than a domain specific judgment about their FLLA..

Among North American samples, it generally makes no difference whether or not a neutral response option is provided (Nunnally, 1978, p. 596). In the present case, it makes a difference because of the so-called Japanese modesty bias. Self-effacing, modest participants might be expected to rate themselves as below average when not given the option of rating themselves as average. I replicated and extended Study 1 during the fall 2002, to verify that similar results would be obtained from a different sample of demographically comparable students,

and to answer the question posed above: Are self-ratings of below average FLLA an expression of a more general response style or self-concept, or is it specific to the domain of foreign language learning?

Participants

Participants were 75 students from the same department in the same school, enrolled in the same compulsory class (51 males, 24 females, average age = 18.9). The same questionnaire was used. However, this time a neutral scale step, explicitly labeled “*perfectly average*” (*choodo heikin* = perfectly average) was included. A scale without the option of “average” forces participants either to self-enhance or to self-efface, and previous research strongly suggests that Japanese students will self-efface, everything else being equal. Thus, the presence of an “average” option should offer a more stringent test, in that it permits participants to avoid self-enhancing without necessarily self-effacing. In other words, if the participants do not genuinely believe that they are below average, they are not obliged for reasons of modesty to claim that they are.

Results

Consistent with the results of Study 1, 76% of this group of students rated themselves below average in foreign language learning ability, 11% rated themselves above average, and 13%, rated themselves as average. The mean self-rating ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.65$) differed from the scale midpoint (perfectly average) at $p < .0001$ ($t(75) = 8.24$). as did the mean obtained in Study 1 differ from the (hypothetical) scale midpoint. Further, if we conservatively assume that all ten of the students who selected the neutral scale step would have selected one of the “above average” steps (6-9) had it not been provided, then the distribution of above average and below average responses in Study 2 does not differ significantly from the distribution of responses in Study 1 ($\chi^2(1, N = 285) = .09$, $p < .78$).

These students appear to believe that they are below average in FLLA¹. It should not be assumed that the meaning of being below average in ability is the same in Japan as in Western countries. Not only “below average” but “average” as well tend to carry pejorative connotations in North America, where individuality and competition are cultural themes. In Japan, it isn’t particularly bad to be average and by extension, being below average may not be as undesirable in Japan as it is in North America. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that a below average self-assessment, rather than discouraging, could indeed encourage greater effort. As Beebe (2001) points out, different students can draw completely opposite conclusions from the same belief. Some students will conclude from a belief that they are “not good at English” that additional effort will be a waste of time, while others will conclude that additional effort is necessary. (She also observes that such conclusions are correlated with the students’ actual proficiency). Moreover, if ability and effort are believed to be inversely related (Hong, 2001) low ability self-attributions could simply serve to warrant higher effort attributions from others. Or they could be irrelevant, since Japanese students believe that achievement is caused by effort (Brown, 2003c; Brown, Gray, & Ferrara, 2003; Singleton, 1995; White, 1987) and only minimally by ability, (Brown, 2003c; Brown, Gray, & Ferrara, 2003). The precise motivational implications of this domain specific negative self-assessment remain to be discovered.

The information that the majority of a group of students regard themselves as below average does not tell us much about individual students. What teachers can do is to counsel those students who need and can benefit from it. These students can be identified on the basis of questionnaire results (see appendix and Brown 2003b),

along with in-class observations (including attendance and participation), and indirect observations via self-reports of out-of class study activity (for example, how much time the student spent on various learning activities), and appropriate achievement measures (test results, for example). The teacher can then decide which students need and might benefit from counseling and on what kind of counseling to offer. Students whose performance is satisfactory will not require individual counseling. Students whose performance is unsatisfactory in relation to their professed goals (Brown, 2003b), and whose out-of-class study behavior is insufficient or inappropriate may need and benefit from counseling. Hopefully, these will be a minority of the class. A simple show of concern or empathy, or a few study hints might possibly suffice. Even just saying “*mo sukoshii ganbaru hoo ga ii*” (you should try a little harder) or “*yareba dekiru*” (you can do it if you try) might help some students. The key is that the teacher must know what the students are doing as well as what they want and what they believe. In the end, individual contact will be necessary, but in the beginning, questionnaire based data collection can be extremely helpful, especially if the issues discussed in this article are kept in mind..

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Appendix

Questionnaire items discussed in this article. The items were presented, as below, in both English and Japanese and were embedded in an extensive survey of attitudes, goals, and beliefs. The entire questionnaire is available from the author.

Using this 9 point scale, how do you regard yourself in these aspects? 次の点について、あなたは自分自身をどのように見えていますか。1～9までのスケールを使って答えてください。

1. [] Ability to learn a foreign language compared to other Japanese college students in general: 一般のほかの日本の大学生と比べて、あなたの外国語を学ぶ能力はどれくらいだと思いますか。
2. [] Social skills compared to other Japanese college students in general: 一般のほかの日本の大学生と比べて、あなたの社会性、社交性はどれくらいだと思いますか。
3. [] Musical taste and judgement compared to other Japanese college students in general: 一般のほかの日本の大学生と比べて、あなたの音楽に対する理解力、判断力はどれくらいだと思いますか。
4. [] Intelligence compared to other Japanese college students in general: 一般のほかの日本の大学生と比べて、あなたの知性はどれくらいだと思いますか。
5. [] Athletic and sports ability compared to other Japanese college students of your own gender in general: 一般のほかの日本の大学生と比べて、あなたの運動能力は、どれくらいだと思いますか。

6. [] Physical attractiveness compared to other Japanese college students of your own gender in general:
一般のほかの日本の大学生（同性）と比べて、あなたの肉体的な魅力はどれくらいだと思いますか。

1 = Very much below average 1 = 平均よりとてもずっと下

2 = Much below average 2 = 平均よりかなり下

3 = Generally below average 3 = 概して平均以下

4 = Slightly below average 4 = 平均より少し下

5 = Perfectly average 5 = ちょうど平均

6 = Slightly above average 6 = 平均より少し上

7 = Generally above average 7 = 概して平均以上

8 = Much above average 8 = 平均よりかなり上

9 = Very much above average 9 = 平均よりとてもずっと上

NOTE. Study 1 used an 8-point scale identical to the one above, but without the “perfectly average” option.

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I am indebted to Kondo Yoko for assistance with various aspects of the research.

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Note

1. FLLA is not the only personal characteristic these students rate themselves below average in. Five other target characteristics were included in the questionnaire (see appendix). A statistically significant majority of the student sample in Study 1 rated themselves below average in social skills (60%), general intelligence (62%) and physical attractiveness (82%), but neither above nor below average in musical judgement and sports abilities. Significantly perhaps, one of the characteristics many Japanese students rate themselves as above average in is *namakemono* (lazy). (Brown & Ferrara, 2003). This suggests a general self-critical attitude, which has been abundantly documented elsewhere (for example, Brown & Ferrara, 2003; Heine, 2003; Heine et al, 2001; Kurman, 2001; Kurman & Sriram, 2002). This does not alter the fact that they rate themselves as below average in FLLA, but it does suggest that further research is needed.