The Effects of Using Digital Technology on Language Anxiety with Japanese Adult ELLs

KHALIL HOMSI
University of San Francisco, United States

Abstract

English being the lingua franca in the globalized economic world, Japanese people are still struggling in English acquisition. The purpose of this study is to determine if language anxiety is due to Japanese shame culture, and to determine if digital technology can help improve English language acquisition as well as reduce the influence of language anxiety. For nine weeks, four adult Japanese participants will be observed at an elementary English language skill level. They will participate in an experiment utilizing digital technology catered to their skills and preference. The data retrieved from the research will help determine if Japanese shame culture does play a role on language acquisition and if digital technology can help reduce the influence it has on Japanese English Language Learners (ELL) with their language acquisition and production.

Keywords: ELLs (English Language Learners), digital technology, shame culture, *haji no bunka*, and language anxiety.

Introduction

Some ELL (English Language Learners) still struggle to master the English language, which is being used as a lingua franca in today's society around the world for various purposes. Some examples for factors pertaining to why ELLs might struggle in their language acquisition include self-esteem, inappropriate learning materials, and cultural influence.

In Japan, English is highly needed in the work force due its economic globalization. However, many Japanese ELLs find that English is a difficult language to learn. This can be caused by many reasons, but little research has been done that regards language anxiety as a factor hindering Japanese ELLs' language acquisition. Hence, the purpose of this research, which is to determine what methods using digital technology as a language learning tool can remove/reduce language anxiety while producing language.

Volunteers (four adult Japanese ELLs at an elementary English language skill level) participated for nine weeks in this research. Digital materials created for this research were catered to the participants' needs and wants. Therefore, digital

materials were constantly changing and evolving to the participants' feedback through the questionnaires and asking participants after every class for feedback. Participants had access to the digital materials anytime they wanted by using any digital device they had at their disposal. Participants were given two questionnaires to help determine the roots of their language anxiety, whether it was culturally based, from lack of preparation, and/or not understanding the materials. The questionnaires helped determine what methods are ideal when implementing digital technology in an ELL curriculum.

Results indicated that most of the participants' language anxiety was due to the lack of preparation when producing language. With the help of digital technology at their disposal, participants were able to reduce their language anxiety and improve their language skills gradually.

Statement of the Problem

English language acquisition is an object of great importance in many parts of the world, especially places that conduct international business such as Japan. Technology is another venture that has taken a big step towards being incorporated into today's society, while already taking foot in the daily lives of many with smart phones, tablets, and laptops, in Japan especially. Also, the fact that "[t]echnology is very much part of language learning throughout the world at all different levels [is important]. We are as likely to find it in the primary sector as much as in adult education" (Motteram, 2013).

Though digital technology can be seen as a beneficial tool for learning that "provide[s] the means for active, authentic learning…," gaps remain in regards to how adult Japanese ELLs benefit from digital technology during the process of language acquisition (Howland, Jonassen, and Marra, 2011, p. 21). One of these gaps can be seen as language anxiety that affects elementary level adult Japanese ELLs. A reason for starting at an elementary level could be to help chart maps towards advanced classes. ELLs at this level can be timid when producing language, but by implementing technology at an early stage "student[s] [are] actively making choices about how to generate, obtain, manipulate, or display information," changing their role as learner, which can help reduce their language anxiety (Means and Olson, 1997, p. 125).

To fill in this particular gap with elementary level adult Japanese ELLs, data should be collected and analyzed for the use of digital technology in the classroom and outside of the class. Results from the data collected through building a curriculum using digital technology as a language learning tool can help fill in missing information pertaining to the use of digital technology and language anxiety for adult Japanese ELLs.

Background and Need for the Study

Fortunately, there are many schools in Japan where people who want to, can learn English. All the while, the type of schools they go to tends to cover only certain aspects of English without any practical thought to the needs of the student. For example, most junior high school, high school, and university students, and on

occasion adults, go to a cram school or tutor centers, otherwise known to the Japanese as Juku (塾), to learn about grammar and practice listening to the English language. This is intended to help students with their examinations. However, those who want to learn more on how to speak usually go to an English conversation school (英会話, Eikaiwa). English conversation schools do touch on other aspects of English, but not so thoroughly or concisely as cram schools. The majority of working adult Japanese ELLs who want, or are mandated by their respective companies, to improve their communication skills in English tend to go to English conversation schools.

Following the mandate to learn English, coupled with the resources spent for such a venture, there is one aspect within the language acquisition process that many adult Japanese ELLs face, particularly at an elementary level, which is language anxiety. Even if students were to go to either cram schools or English conversational schools, Japanese students disclose themselves less often than western students for multiple reasons (LeVine, 2010, p. 102-104). Living under a *haji no bunka* (恥の文化), meaning shame culture to the Japanese and referred to as shame society to westerners (Midooka, 1990), lifestyle can be seen as a big obstacle in regards to adult Japanese ELLs' language acquisition. Embarrassment is only one of the shame culture factors: students also tend to avoid participating due to the fact that making errors can bring shame to them. Also, asking questions presents the notion that one does not understand a certain aspect of a lesson, which can create language anxiety within the student(s).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to see how digital technology can benefit adult Japanese ELLs at an elementary level with regard to their language anxiety. Also, most adult Japanese ELLs who return to learning English usually have "experienced Japanese teacher-focused techniques [while attending secondary schools and higher education institutes], but their mentors will have been inadequately trained in TEFL, and lacked the confidence themselves to speak in English" (Zakhareuski, no date). This causes returning ELLs to restart their language acquisition at an elementary level at an English conversation school. This in turn causes many Japanese ELLs to doubt themselves while producing utterances, which can build language anxiety with the ELL.

By recognizing the students' needs for learning English, a curriculum has to be made that fulfills all aspects of English so students can properly master their acquisition with the use of digital technology. These benefits are not limited to just the language aspects of English, for example, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, but to also see if it can help increase study time for students. Especially for those who have a busy schedule, to reduce language anxiety, and to see if cultural standards plays a role in language anxiety

Description of the Research

There are six parts to this research. Each part will pertain to a segment of each lesson that will be broken down. The research duration was eight weeks plus a ninth week for assessment of the previous week's materials and final activity. The parts are broken down as follows:
1. When digital technology is used in a class, and the context of how it is used.
2. Other methods that do not use digital technology in class.
3. In-class assessment of the newly acquired target language.
4. Digital activities done at home.
5. Assessment of homework activities done online.
6. Review of previous week's materials and assessment.

The content of the materials is based on the English conversation school's textbooks that the participants are enrolled in. Each week has a new target language that participants must learn and be assessed on. The contents of the materials are as follows:
1. Preposition part 1 (object placement).
2. Preposition part 2 (giving direction to a location).
3. Comparative and superlative adjectives.
4. Modal verb.
5. Past tense modal verb.
6. Plural countable nouns, uncountable nouns, and quantifiers.
7. Future tense.
8. First conditional.

The content of the materials influences how digital materials are made each week and placed on a website catering to the participants and what they are learning, "Team Orange ESL". Also, participants' feedback contributes to how digital materials should be created while allowing the flexibility and feedback from participants that presents the opportunity to accommodate the language learners' needs. This in turn allows participants to be less susceptible to language anxiety. Furthermore, participants filled out a questionnaire pertaining to the use of digital technology in their language acquisition.

Methodology

Participants for this project were students from an English conversation school in Japan, and the lessons were conducted as an adaptation to their regular lessons. There were four participants who will be to referred to as NT, MT, OK, and ST. This protects the participants' privacy and follows the outline of the consent form that has been signed by them. With the consent form, the participants were also given a bill of rights form in Japanese detailed with contact information if they feel their rights have been violated.

Participants were all at an elementary level of English skills. The participants should already have mastered the foundation level of English, which is basic vocabulary and grammar rules, for example, basic introductions, one's own likes and

dislikes, and giving the time). The participants were adults that have careers that require them to utilize English through different language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). All agreed to participate in this research, and signed a consent form.

The volunteers participated for eight weeks, making an additional ninth week the final week for data collection and an in class final project. During this time, data was collected through the activities the volunteers did online and in class using digital technology. Online data collection determined participants' English acquisition milestones through their submitted activities and participation. The activities changed every week in accordance to the lesson and unit. While being observed in class, the participants were observed on how quickly they could retain and produce utterances in English with few or no mistakes while also observing participation and collecting data in regards to language anxiety (this can include, but is not limited to, regression from participation, looking confused, and not doing homework).

The materials are based on the English conversation school's textbook that they used as agreed with the school's management. However, when creating the materials, the software that was used varied depending on the activity (with most of it being from Google Drive) and the type of video being created. The activities and lecture/review videos were put on a Google website and YouTube channel. The digital materials evolve to fit the participants' needs and preferences. Participants have unlimited access to the materials to previously learned materials on any digital device. Furthermore, online materials were created with regard to the students' understanding of the materials after being assessed during and prior to the class's conclusion.

As an observer and instructor, lessons were held as usual, except for the addition of online materials and use of digital technology in class. In the beginning of the class, participants were asked a series of questions in regards to the previous grammar points from the previous week. Participants received a lecture concerning the grammar point to be covered for that week. Then, a speaking activity was implemented for the participants to utilize what they have learned for that day. Finally, the participants were assessed one final time to determine their understanding of the material before being given direction to the homework.

The participants' initials are used in order to protect their privacy. Moreover, none of the activities conducted online ask for any of the participants' personal information, including their names, to protect their privacy. Any activities that were created by the students, were placed online with their permission while editing out any divulged personal information that has been used.

In the middle and at the end of the research, participants were given questionnaires to fill out. The first questionnaire was to help assess what the participants' acclimation to the use of digital technology was like. This determines how materials should be created and delivered to participants, which could include digital videos and activities. The second questionnaire served to determine if participants felt they improved in their English acquisition throughout the research process and recognized if their language anxiety had subsided while producing utterance. Results from the questionnaire were then analyzed and compared to the observation conducted.

Findings

Much can be seen happening with regards to the observation and research with the use of digital technology to help with English acquisition. The progression of language acquisition was positive and showed improvements throughout the research. Hence, as predicted, digital technology does play a vital role in subsiding the language leaners' language anxiety when implemented properly. With regard to their potential language anxiousness, the language learners' grammar use, oral utterance, and vocabulary knowledge have improved throughout the nine weeks of research, suggesting that digital technology has a useful and vital role as a language learning tool. This can be seen in various ways, but one apparent characteristic of improvement is the participants' capability of self-correction, and gradual improvement in their language production.

Having a busy schedule in Japan due to work is a common norm within the Japanese society. However, work can impede on one's life and schedule in many ways. For example, time with family, to do hobbies, or study another language, and so much more, are all shortened. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2015), the average employee in Japan works about 145.1 hours a month. Including overtime, adult Japanese ELLs might struggle with finding time to study English (p. 133-134). Many Japanese people appreciate things that can help create more personal time for whatever they want to do. "[T]he increase in Japan's share of international trade and financial transactions has had a major impact on the world economy in general and on the U.S. economy in particular," is one of the many reasons why Japanese adults feel they should, and sometimes are required to, continue with their English language acquisition even after primary and secondary school (Dekle and Hamao, 2016). Most Japanese adults usually learn English for two reasons, either for travelling or for work. Doing research based using digital technology for English acquisition, participants were happy that much of their study time could be done while commuting to and from work. This is due to the fact that "[f]or learners' online learning has no time zone, and place and distance are not a problem. In asynchronous online learning, students have access to online materials anytime…" (Pourbonakdar and Khanaposhtani, 2015, p. 520). Also, looking at the questionnaires' responses, participants were more willing to do the online activities and listen/watch the digital videos because it does not take time away from their family or the things they like to do.

Allowing participants to have access to English materials whenever and wherever they were needed cultivated a motivating environment when they came to class. "Students' responses have shown that there is a strong relationship between language learning motivational factors and using technology" (Amine, Benachaiba, and Guemide, 2012, p. 79). This was seen through the engagement the participants had in class, with each other, and activities done online and in the class throughout the nine weeks of research. The questionnaires' participants submitted indicated that the digital materials that they had access to, helped them prepare for the following week's review sessions. This in turn helped them reduce their anxiety and hesitation when producing utterance as one of the participant mentions.

Throughout the nine weeks of research, participants presented an increase in participation and motivation when using English while communicating. However, the change was gradual and noticeable change can be seen after using the Plotagon™ video software for the participants to use as reference. Participants presented less anxiety when producing language in different forms (writing and speaking) and a gradual improvement in the participants' English skills.

It is important to note that during week four's class, participants were not as engaging when asked to produce utterance. Participants were timid and hesitated when asked to produce language in any form. Participants complained that week three's video, "Comparative and Superlative Adjectives," was too complicated and long to understand. Also, the video was not as interactive as week two's video. Though there were some examples given in the video, it is easy to see that the explanations on the video were either too complicated or the video could have been so book-oriented that participants could have not been motivated or actively engaged with the materials. It is likely that participants were not as prepared when coming to class and presented language anxiety when asked to produce utterance.

However, when changing the format of the video by using the Plotagon™ software, the participants had an increase of motivation and participation in class. The videos provided context for the participants, and this allowed participants to understand how to use the different target language within context. According to the receptionist at the English conversation school the research was based at, the participants were very pleased with the format, and type of video that was created for them after watching the first Plotagon™ video for week four. Participants mentioned that the video helped them understand the prior week's language much better when implemented in a conversation. Also, they were happy to hear that there was a Japanese English speaker (Meg) in the video which gave them more encouragement to try harder at learning English.

In addition, it can be seen that the participants' language skills were gradually improving over the course of the research. This too can be due to the fact that the participants were better prepared with the materials being used. This can be in some way associated with the participants' silent period, where they were building comprehension of the target language being taught. Though there might be some utterance prior to the research, their comprehension of those utterances may not be fully understood when produced. However, providing digital materials, the participants have the convenience of being exposed to English more frequently allowing them the opportunity to build on whatever they do not understand. This could have played a role in the increase of their utterance and reducing their language anxiety when producing utterance.

With regard to *haji no bunka* being an influential aspect when learning English, only one participant admitted that they felt that it influenced how they learned English. This individual felt that when she made a mistake while producing language, other individuals would look at her differently, which made him feel some form of anxiety. The other participants felt that *haji no bunka* had no influence in their language learning and production, but the lack of preparation and understanding of materials is what made them feel anxious when trying to produce language. It is noteworthy to mention that all participants do agree that the lack of preparation does make them feel some form of anxiety when producing English. Participants felt

35

that the digital materials that were created for this research helped them prepare. Participants' anxiety can be seen through their hesitation to respond to questions, activities, and instructions. Also, the participants' facial expression contributed in knowing if they felt anxious towards their understanding of the materials being taught to them and/or situations when they feel they are being overwhelmed with the materials and or activities that need to be done (for example, when NT felt uncomfortable doing the Plotagon[TM] activity with a partner.)

Furthermore, participants have indicated, based from their responses to the questionnaires, that digital technology has helped them learn English due to its convenience, and found that digital technology has impacted their language skills in a positive way. The participants also indicated that the digital activities were very helpful in understanding the target language they were learning, and the digital activities weren't too difficult to do, but were challenging enough for them. As for the Plotagon[TM] activity, participants indicated that the activity was very engaging but challenging in some points. Answers from the questionnaires stated that pronunciation, pitch, annotation and speed of one's speaking brought some anxiety when recording. However, participants indicated that they would like to do more Plotagon[TM] activities as well using digital materials in future classes.

Discussion

Being beneficial to English acquisition and language anxiety, digital technology has proven to be a useful learning tool for ELLs and their instructors.

Most participants have indicated that their language anxiety is not influenced by their cultural lifestyle, *haji no bunka*, but from being unprepared. When implementing the digital materials for the participants, they declared that it gave more opportunities to prepare for the materials which boosted their confidence when producing utterance. This finding contradicts Yalçın and İnceçay (2014) who found that unpreparedness reduced language anxiety. It was sometimes the competitiveness that helped reduce language anxiety, as seen in week three's review, allowing more production of utterance, similar to what Jin, Bot, and Keijzer's (2015) results claimed (p.82). Furthermore, by limiting the amount of corrective feedback from the instructor, language anxiety can be seen subsided and participants correcting each other actually promoted encouragement to produce more utterance. This result can be correlated to Lee's (2015) findings that corrective feedback should not be excessive, but it can have a positive impact (p. 88).

Research concerning digital technology implemented in adult Japanese ELLs at an elementary level has shed some light on the topic regarding language anxiety. However, there is a need of further research that needs to be conducted to fill in the missing gaps, for example, pronunciation, improving English language skills, and so much more. The main limitation to this research is the fact that it was conducted with a very small number of participants, which yielded results that raise the question if digital technology does have a beneficial effect on other ELLs' language anxiety. Hence, although digital technology did have a positive impact with this research, it may not work for everyone.

Recommendation

Though it was evident that digital technology helped reduce the participants' language anxiety for this research, there still has to be further research concerning this topic. With only four participants in the study, it can be seen as a limitation of the results and that this topic of area should be further examined. Also, the data retrieved from this research suggests that the participants grew with their English language skills, which reduced their language anxiety.

The participants' preparation capability also played a vital role in diminishing their language anxiety. This was due to the fact the participants for this research used their smartphone devices most of the time to access the digital materials, hence giving them more preparation time. However, not all adult learners have a smartphone and/or the digital technology that the participants had for this research. Further research needs to be done concerning this topic to help fill in the gap regarding Japanese ELLs who do not have access to some of the digital technology to do the digital materials at a convenient time. For example, an ELL accessing digital materials with a smartphone while commuting to work versus an individual who does not have a smartphone to access the digital materials and to wait until they have access to some sort of digital technology).

The cultural aspect in causing language anxiety in Japan, *haji no bunka*, should also be researched in depth. This topic can be a sensitive issue with some Japanese ELLs, especially those who are proud of their nationality or are not aware of the topic. It can take some time for Japanese ELLs to acknowledge that *haji no bunka* does play a role in one's language anxiety. An ethno-linguistic study should be conducted on this topic due to the cultural aspects of the topic when learning a second language.

Conclusion

With the limited research done concerning the implementation of digital technology with elementary level adult Japanese ELLs, this research helped shed some light on a method to reduce language anxiety. The purpose of this research was to see if digital technology can help Japanese ELLs reduce their language anxiety when producing language by improving their study time when utilizing digital technology. The results from the research have given some insight on language anxiety while incorporating digital technology to adult Japanese ELLs at elementary level.

Participants have indicated through the questionnaires that digital materials helped them to prepare and understand the English grammar points that they were studying. This in a way allowed the participants to improve their grammar while reducing their language anxiety when producing English. Though at first it was believed that the participants' cultural influence, *haji no bunka*, had a role in their language anxiety, most participants declared it was not due to their cultural background, but unpreparedness. This unpreparedness is what created language anxiety, but with the ability to utilize the digital materials anywhere, participants were able to prepare, thereby causing their language anxiety to decrease while producing utterance.

Digital technology has proven to be beneficial through various methods for example, digital videos, digital activities, and digital images, but it is important to note that this was only accomplishable because students' needs were accommodated. For example, week three's digital video was too complicated to understand, and participants wanted videos that gave examples of how target languages are used in context. To accommodate the participants' wants, the program Plotagon™ was implemented for week four's video, and participants were very pleased with the accommodation. Hence, knowing the participants' needs, wants, and their learning style was a contributing factor to the improvement of their English acquisition. With every step up the elementary level ladder the students' language anxiety decreased, in part by preparation, student self-study, and the use and implementation of digital technology.

References

Amine, B., Benachaiba, C., and Guemide, B. (2012). Using Multimedia to Motivate Students in EFL Classrooms: A Case Study of English Master's Students at Jijel University, Algeria, *Malaysian Journal of Distance Education*, 14, 2, pp. 63-81, *Education Source, EBSCO host* [Online] Available at: http://0-eds.a.ebscohost.com.ignacio.usfca.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=662d38d6-b177-4c76-bc5e-22b63cad53d6%40sessionmgr4004&vid=5&hid=4111 (Accessed: 22 May 2016)

Dekle, R. and Hamao, Y. (eds.). (2016). *Japan and the world economy*. [Online] Available at: https://www.elsevier.com/journals/japan-and-the-world-economy/0922-1425?generatepdf=true (Accessed: 25 May 2016).

Homsi, K. (2015). *Team Orange ESL*. [Online] Available at: https://sites.google.com/site/teamorangeesl/ (Accessed: 22 May 2016).

Howland, J. L., Jonassen, D. H. and Marra, R. M. (2011). *Meaningful learning with technology*. 4th edn. United States: Pearson College Div.

Japan, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Statistics Bureau (2015). [Online] Available at: http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/pdf/2015all.pdf#page=17 (Accessed: 25 May 2016).

Jin, Y., de Bot, K., & Keijzer, M. (2015). The anxiety-proficiency relationship and the stability of anxiety: The case of Chinese university learners of English and Japanese, *Narcis, EBSCO host* [Online] Available at: http://0-www.sciencedirect.com.ignacio.usfca.edu/science?_ob=GatewayURL&_origin=EBSCOLINK&_method=citationSearch&_volkey=20835205%23%23%23&_version=1&md5=390150fac6e2bdfdcdfcc2a7ff292b11 (Accessed: 22 May 2016)

Lee, E. (2016). Reducing international graduate students' language anxiety through oral pronunciation corrections, *System*, 56, p. 78-95, *Scopus®, EBSCOhost* [Online]

Available at: http://0-ejournals.ebsco.com.ignacio.usfca.edu/Direct.asp?AccessToken=23F1A9L8S2XSYLY3BZA1MWHSM2MF8SY2M&Show=Object (Accessed: 22 May 2016)

LeVine, R. A. (2010). *Psychological anthropology: A reader on self in culture*. 1st edn. United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell (an imprint of John Wiley & Sons Ltd).

Means, B. and Olson, K. (1997). *Technology & education reform studies of education reform*. *Diane Pub Co.* [Online] Available at: https://books.google.co.jp/books?id=AnauBFap5JQC&pg=PA125&lpg=PA125&dq=actively+making+choices+about+how+to+generate,+obtain,+manipulate,+or+display+information&source=bl&ots=RgY0Q5lyzt&sig=NpUPpdl4JsXgmkEGUafp9QAbG5o&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiBxqzVq-_MAhXGGJQKHbX7AWIQ6AEIIjAB#v=onepage&q=actively%20making%20choices%20about%20how%20to%20generate%2C%20obtain%2C%20manipulate%2C%20or%20display%20information&f=false (Accessed: 22 May 2016)

Midooka, K. (1990). Characteristics of Japanese-style communication. *Media, Culture and Society, 12*, 477-489.

Motteram, G. (2013). *About the voices magazine*. [Online] Available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/the-benefits-new-technology-language-learning (Accessed: 23 May 2016).

Pourbonakdar, S. and Khanaposhtani, F. M. (2015). University Professors' and Students' Perceptions and Satisfaction toward English Language Teaching E-Learning Educational System, *Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods*, 5(2), pp. 520–526, *ProQuest* [Online] Available at: http://search.proquest.com.libproxy1.usc.edu/docview/1779889381/fulltextPDF/5678239520245ACPQ/1?accountid=14749 (Accessed: 22 May 2016)

Yalçın, Ö, & İnceçay, V. (2014). Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety: The case of Spontaneous Speaking Activities, *Procedia - Social And Behavioral Sciences*, 116, 5th World Conference on Educational Sciences, pp. 2620-2624, *ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost* [Online] Available at: http://0-ejournals.ebsco.com.ignacio.usfca.edu/Direct.asp?AccessToken=7DILRT9B3DJJN3XINM0XV9IRJ5OIB3NOJ&Show=Object (Accessed: 22 May 2016)

Zakhareuski, A. (no date) *How to teach Japanese adults: Part One*. Available at: http://busyteacher.org/3725-how-to-teach-japanese-adults-1.html (Accessed: 22 May 2016).

Author's Brief Bio
Master of Arts in TESOL Khalil Homsi, University of San Francisco, United States of America. Email: kkhomsi@dons.usfca.edu