

*A Basic Study on the Conformity of Japanese University Students in Language
Communication Activities*

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Abstract

As a basic study of the communication activities with the system we have been developing, we investigated the affective factors related to student conformity by conducting a questionnaire with 81 Japanese university students in two classes. The results showed that: (1) there was no significant relationship between student conformity with another's opinion and nervousness during English communication in either of two classes, while there was a weak relationship between student conformity and negative attitudes toward listening/speaking in English only in the Business Administration class; (2) in both classes, there was a moderate relationship between student conformity and indirect ways of self-expression, as well as feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions. These results suggest that there exists no significant relationship between student conformity and nervousness during English communication. However, from the detailed analyses, it is assumed that some factors exist between them. Further investigation is required by targeting more students. The results and analyses also suggest that indirect ways of self-expression may be one of the factors which slightly influences student conformity. Meanwhile, student conformity is related to feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions. However, it is not clear which is the main factor of this relationship. Therefore, these results and discussion indicate that we should focus on reducing students' feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions and on familiarizing them with expressing their true intentions, when we design and implement communication activities.

Keywords: communication activities, nervousness, conformity, affective factors

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Introduction

According to the general policies of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (MEXT) (2014a, 2014b), it is important to establish an educational environment that corresponds to globalization and to foster younger generations with wide global perspectives and strong communication skills. However, many students feel inhibited or nervous during face-to-face communication in foreign languages (Horwitz, 1995; Suleimenova, 2013). Some of them may feel a similar way even when speaking Japanese.

We have been developing a prototype system for communication activities using CG characters in order to help reduce student nervousness and shyness while facilitating their familiarity with real conversation (Kashiwagi et al., 2016; Shibuya et al., 2016). As a basic study for supporting and encouraging students in their communication activities through the above system, we investigated potential affective factors related to student nervousness in language communication activities by conducting a correlational study. The results of our prior study (Kashiwagi et al., 2017) showed weak positive relationships between the item "I tend to conform with another's opinion" and student nervousness during face-to-face English communication, as well as negative attitudes toward reading/writing in English. The item of student conformity with another's opinion belongs to a different category than other items in this study, such as taciturnity and shyness.

The term conformity is often used to indicate an agreement made in order to "fit in" or "go along" with surrounding people. Depending on the situation, conformity can have positive or negative effects. When it works positively, communication runs smoothly and constructively. It may help people feel that they are accepted and encourage them to develop harmonious relationships.

However, some studies have claimed that there are negative aspects of conformity. Igarashi et al. (2014) pointed out that recent Japanese university students tend to conform with the opinions of others and refrain from stating their own opinions in order to maintain social relationships. Sakamoto (1999) reported that conformity can produce conflicts between an individual's opinion and those of others, which may cause emotional stress. Tajima et al. (2014) examined the interpersonal motivations and conforming behaviors of Japanese university students. Their study found that overtly conforming with the opinions of others has resulted in difficulties with and the dilution of reliable relationships. If conformity works negatively, a lack of diversity will result. The person engaging in conformity may be scared of rejection, and may become reluctant to express his/her own opinion. In some cases, conforming with the opinions of others can cause individuals to agree with other members of their groups publicly while inwardly dissenting.

Therefore, understanding the importance of behavior leading to conformity may help Japanese students to develop healthier communication habits and good interpersonal relationships. To focus on student conformity in this study, we conducted a correlational study based on the results of a questionnaire administered to Japanese university students in two classes (i.e., 40 in Engineering class and 41 in Business Administration class).

In the following chapter, we describe our prior study. Then we provide the methods of the present study, the results, and discussion. Finally, we present our conclusions and recommendations for further study.

A Prior Study

In our prior study (Kashiwagi et al., 2017), we investigated the affective factors related to student nervousness during language communication activities by conducting a questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to 84 Japanese university students in two classes to gather responses regarding nervousness during face-to-face Japanese and English communication, taciturnity and shyness, negative attitudes toward English, and conformity with another's opinion.

The results provided significant evidence that: (1) student nervousness during face-to-face Japanese communication is to some extent influenced by their taciturnity and shyness; (2) student nervousness during face-to-face Japanese communication, their taciturnity and shyness, and negative attitudes toward English influence their nervousness during face-to-face English communication. The affective factors related to student nervousness during face-to-face English communication differ according to the classroom settings.

The results also showed weak positive relationships between student conformity with another's opinion and nervousness during English communication, as well as negative attitudes toward reading/writing in English.

To investigate further in this study, we added question items to our original questionnaire (Kashiwagi et al., 2017) focusing on student conformity. We conducted a correlational study using the revised questionnaire, which is discussed in the following chapter.

Research Questions and Methodology

Research Questions

This study's intent was to address the following research questions:

- (1) Is student conformity with another's opinion related to either nervousness during English communication or negative attitudes toward English?
- (2) Is student conformity with another's opinion related to indirect ways of self-expression or feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions?

Participants

This study's participants consisted of 81 first-year students in two English language classes at a university in Japan (i.e., 40 in Engineering class and 41 in Business Administration class). The number of students and their respective majors are shown in Table 1. These students completed a questionnaire, the questions of which being displayed in Table 2.

Table 1: Number and Major Field of Participants

Class	Grade	Major Field	Number of Students
A	1 st year	Engineering	40
B	1 st year	Business Administration	41

Data Collection and Analysis

A questionnaire was administered to gather responses from students about their nervousness during face-to-face communication in both Japanese and English, conformity with another's opinion, negative attitudes toward English, and taciturnity and shyness. The questionnaire items are shown in Table 2. Responses were scored on a five-point Likert Scale (i.e., 1 point for Strongly Agree, 2 points for Agree, 3 points for Neutral, 4 points for Disagree, and 5 points for Strongly Disagree). As the statements were posited in negative terms in this questionnaire, we scored 1 point for Strongly Agree and 5 points for Strongly Disagree. Through a correlational analysis, we attempted to investigate how the variables were related to one another.

Table 2: Questionnaire Items

Regarding Face-to-face Communication in Japanese and Student Conformity
Q1. I feel nervous when I use Japanese during face-to-face communication.
Q2. Usually I don't say a lot in Japanese.
Q3. I feel shy when I'm communicating in Japanese and have to look the other person in the eye.
Q4. I tend to conform with another's opinion.
Q5. I express myself in an indirect way.
Q6. I'm afraid that my opinion might be rejected.
Regarding Face-to-face Communication in English and Negative Attitudes Toward English
Q7. I feel nervous when I use English during face-to-face communication.
Q8. I'm not good at reading/writing in English.
Q9. I'm not good at listening/speaking in English.

Results and Discussion

We investigated research questions related to student conformity. The results of the questionnaire responses are listed in Table 3. To analyze the relationships between the variables, we calculated Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficients on the data from the questionnaire, as shown in Table 4. *Correlation represents statistical significance at the 0.05 level.

Relationships Between Student Conformity and Nervousness During English Communication, and Negative Attitudes Toward English

We investigated how student conformity with the opinions of others was related to nervousness during English communication and negative attitudes toward English. Q4 in Table 3 and Table 4 concerns student conformity, Q7 concerns nervousness during

face-to-face English communication, and Q8 and Q9 concern negative attitudes toward English.

The results of the correlation coefficients between Q4 and Q7 in the two classes indicated in Table 4 (class A: $r_{Q4Q7}=0.31$, class B: $r_{Q4Q7}=0.18$) show that no significant relationship exists between student conformity and nervousness during face-to-face English communication. The results of the correlation coefficients between Q4 and Q8 in the two classes (class A: $r_{Q4Q8}=0.26$, class B: $r_{Q4Q8}=0.22$) also show no significant relationship between student conformity and negative attitudes toward reading/writing in English.

Meanwhile, the results of the correlation coefficient between Q4 and Q9 in class B in Table 4 ($r_{Q4Q9}=0.33$) show that a significantly weak positive relationship exists between student conformity and negative attitudes toward listening/speaking in English. However, the correlation coefficient between Q4 and Q9 in class A is not statistically significant.

These results suggest that student conformity with the opinions of others is not related to nervousness during English communication, nor is it related to negative attitudes toward reading/writing in English in either of two classes. Conformity with another's opinion is slightly related to negative attitudes toward listening/speaking in English only in the Business Administration class.

Table 3: Questionnaire Results

Items	Class	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q1	A	5 (12.5%)	9 (22.5%)	6 (15%)	14 (35%)	6 (15%)
	B	6 (14.6%)	9 (22%)	5 (12.2%)	11(26.8%)	10(24.4%)
Q2	A	1 (2.5%)	11(27.5%)	14 (35%)	9 (22.5%)	5 (12.5%)
	B	7 (17.1%)	7 (17.1%)	8 (19.5%)	15(36.6%)	4 (9.7%)
Q3	A	2 (5%)	12 (30%)	10 (25%)	9 (22.5%)	7 (17.5%)
	B	4 (9.8%)	9 (22%)	4 (9.8%)	14 (34%)	10(24.4%)
Q4	A	5 (12.5%)	14 (35%)	14 (35%)	5 (12.5%)	2 (5%)
	B	5 (12.2%)	12(29.3%)	14(34.1%)	8 (19.5%)	2 (4.9%)
Q5	A	3 (7.5%)	10 (25%)	12 (30%)	13(32.5%)	2 (5%)
	B	2 (4.9%)	9 (22%)	12(29.3%)	17(41.4%)	1 (2.4%)
Q6	A	1 (2.5%)	15(37.5%)	14 (35%)	7 (17.5%)	3 (7.5%)
	B	3 (7.3%)	16 (39%)	12(29.3%)	6 (14.6%)	4 (9.8%)
Q7	A	12 (30%)	18 (45%)	6 (15%)	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)
	B	16 (39%)	19(46.3%)	4 (9.8%)	2 (4.9%)	0 (0%)
Q8	A	6 (15%)	15(37.5%)	11(27.5%)	7 (17.5%)	1 (2.5%)
	B	7 (17%)	13 (32%)	10 (24%)	11 (27%)	0 (0%)
Q9	A	18 (45%)	14 (35%)	7 (17.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)
	B	22 (54%)	10 (24%)	3 (7%)	6 (15%)	0 (0%)

Table 4: Correlations Among Questionnaire Items

	Class	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
Q1	A	—								
	B	—								
Q2	A	0.35*	—							
	B	0.53*	—							
Q3	A	0.42*	0.26	—						
	B	0.53*	0.68*	—						
Q4	A	0.14	0.12	0.38*	—					
	B	0.23	0.30	0.34*	—					
Q5	A	0.38*	0.26	0.24	0.59*	—				
	B	0.36*	0.50*	0.49*	0.53*	—				
Q6	A	0.21	0.11	0.13	0.55*	0.48*	—			
	B	0.32*	0.34*	0.27	0.53*	0.49*	—			
Q7	A	0.29	0.14	0.26	0.31	0.23	0.20	—		
	B	0.46*	0.28	0.40*	0.18	0.47*	0.27	—		
Q8	A	0.08	-0.04	0.13	0.26	0.05	0.08	0.02	—	
	B	0.26	0.10	0.20	0.22	0.05	0.41*	0.37*	—	
Q9	A	0.26	0.13	-0.03	0.17	-0.03	0.10	0.32*	0.25	—
	B	0.20	0.13	0.02	0.33*	0.33*	0.35*	0.43*	0.30	—

* $p < .05$

To deepen our analysis, we will further analyze the following results: (1) the relationship between student conformity with another's opinion (Q4) and nervousness during face-to-face English communication (Q7); (2) the relationships between student conformity with another's opinion (Q4) and negative attitudes toward English (Q8 & Q9).

First, we will look at how the participants who showed agreement with Q4 responded to Q7. Meanwhile, we will look at how the participants who showed agreement with Q7 responded to Q4. According to the results of Q4 in Table 3, a total of 19 participants in class A (47.5%) showed agreement with Q4 (i.e., "I tend to conform with another's opinion"). In class B, a total of 17 participants (41.5%) agreed with Q4. In both classes, a little more than 40% showed agreement with Q4. Regarding Q7, among 19 participants who agreed with Q4 in class A, 16 (84.2%) showed agreement with Q7 (i.e., "I feel nervous when I use English during face-to-face communication"). In class B, among 17 participants who agreed with Q4, 13 participants (68.4%) showed agreement with Q7. Approximately 70 to 80% of the respective participants who tended to conform with the opinions of others felt nervous when they used English during face-to-face communication.

Conversely, the results of Q7 in Table 3 showed that a total of 30 participants in class A (75%) showed agreement with Q7. In class B, a total of 35 participants (85.3%) agreed with Q7. In both classes, more than 75% felt nervous when they used English

during face-to-face communication. Regarding Q4, among the participants who agreed with Q7, 16 (53.3%) in class A and 13 (37.1%) in class B showed agreement with Q4. Approximately 40 to 50% of the respective participants who felt nervous during face-to-face English communication tended to conform with the opinions of others.

The results of the correlation coefficients in this study showed no significant relationship between student conformity with another's opinion (Q4) and nervousness during face-to-face English communication (Q7). However, from the above detailed analyses, it is assumed that some factors exist between them. We need to investigate further by targeting more students.

Next, we will look at how participants who showed agreement with Q4 responded to Q8 or Q9. Meanwhile, we will look at how participants who showed agreement with Q8 or Q9 responded to Q4.

Regarding Q4 and Q8, among 19 participants who agreed with Q4 in class A, 12 (63.2%) showed agreement with Q8. In class B, among 17 participants who agreed with Q4, 8 (42.1%) showed agreement with Q8. A total of 63.2% (class A) and 42.1% (class B) of the respective participants who tended to conform with the opinions of others felt that they were not good at reading/writing in English.

Conversely, from the results of Q8 in Table 3, a total of 21 participants in class A (52.5%) showed agreement with Q8. In class B, a total of 20 participants (49%) agreed with Q8. In both classes, approximately 50% of the participants felt that they were not good at reading/writing in English. Regarding Q4, among the participants who agreed with Q8, 12 in class A and 8 in class B showed agreement with Q4. A total of 57.1% (class A) and 40% (class B) of participants who were not good at reading/writing in English tended to conform with the opinions of others.

These analyses support the above suggestion that student conformity with another's opinion is not related to negative attitudes toward reading/writing in English.

Meanwhile, regarding Q4 and Q9, among 19 participants who agreed with Q4 in class A, 16 (84.2%) showed agreement with Q9. In class B, among 17 participants who agreed with Q4, 14 (73.7%) showed agreement with Q9. More than 70 to 80% of the respective participants who tended to conform with the opinions of others felt that they were not good at listening/speaking in English.

Conversely, from the results of Q9 in Table 3, a total of 32 participants in both classes (class A: 80%, class B: 78%) showed agreement with Q9. Approximately 80% of the participants in both classes felt that they were not good at listening/speaking in English. Regarding Q4, among the participants who agreed with Q9, 16 (50%) in class A and 14 (43.8%) in class B showed agreement with Q4. In both classes, approximately 40 to 50% of the participants who were not good at listening/speaking in English tended to conform with the opinions of others.

The results of the correlation coefficients in this study showed a weak positive relationship between student conformity and negative attitudes toward listening/speaking in English only in the Business Administration class. However,

from the above detailed analyses, it is also assumed that some factors exist between them. We need to investigate further regarding this relationship.

Relationships Between Student Conformity and Indirect Ways of Self-Expression, as well as Feelings of Apprehension Regarding the Possible Rejection of Their Opinions

We investigated how student conformity with another's opinion was related to indirect ways of self-expression, as well as feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions. Q5 in Table 3 and Table 4 concerns students' indirect ways of self-expression, and Q6 concerns feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions.

From the results of the correlation coefficients between Q4 and Q5 in the two classes in Table 4 (class A: $r_{Q4Q5}=0.59$, class B: $r_{Q4Q5}=0.53$), a moderate positive relationship exists between student conformity with another's opinion and indirect ways of self-expression. The results of the correlation coefficients between Q4 and Q6 in the two classes (class A: $r_{Q4Q6}=0.55$, class B: $r_{Q4Q6}=0.53$) also show a moderate positive relationship between student conformity with another's opinion and feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions.

These results suggest that student conformity with another's opinion is related to indirect ways of self-expression, and feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions.

To deepen our analysis, we will look at the following relationships further: (1) the relationship between student conformity with another's opinion (Q4) and indirect ways of self-expression (Q5); (2) the relationship between student conformity with another's opinion (Q4) and feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions (Q6).

First, we will look at how the participants who showed agreement with Q5 responded to Q4. Meanwhile, we will look at how the participants who showed agreement with Q4 responded to Q5. According to the results of Q5 in Table 3, a total of 13 participants (32.5%) in class A showed agreement with Q5. In class B, a total of 11 participants (26.9%) agreed with Q5. In both classes, approximately 30% showed agreement with Q5. Regarding Q4, among 13 participants who agreed with Q5 in class A, 11 (84.6%) showed agreement with Q4. In class B, among 11 participants who agreed with Q5, 8 (72.7%) showed agreement with Q4. In both classes, more than 70 to 80% of the participants who expressed themselves in indirect ways tended to conform with the opinions of others.

Conversely, among 19 participants who agreed with Q4 in class A, 11 (57.9%) showed agreement with Q5. In class B, among 17 participants who agreed with Q4, 8 (47.1%) showed agreement with Q5. Approximately 50% of the respective participants who tended to conform with the opinions of others expressed themselves in indirect ways.

From the above detailed analyses, it is implicated that indirect ways of self-expression may be one of the factors which slightly influences conformity with another's opinion.

Next, we will look at how the participants who showed agreement with Q6 responded to Q4. Meanwhile, we will look at how the participants who showed agreement with Q4 responded to Q6. From the results of Q6 in Table 3, a total of 16 participants (40%) in class A showed agreement with Q6. In class B, a total of 19 participants (46.3%) agreed with Q6. In both classes, approximately 40% showed agreement with Q6. Regarding Q4, among 16 participants who agreed with Q6 in class A, 11 (68.8%) showed agreement with Q4. In class B, among 19 participants who agreed with Q6, 12 (63.2%) showed agreement with Q4. In both classes, approximately 65% of the participants who were afraid that their opinions would be rejected tended to conform with the opinions of others.

Conversely, among 19 participants who agreed with Q4 in class A, 11 (57.9%) showed agreement with Q6. In class B, among 17 participants who agreed with Q4, 12 (70.6%) showed agreement with Q6. Approximately 60 to 70% of the respective participants who tended to conform with the opinions of others were afraid that their opinions would be rejected.

These analyses support the above suggestion that student conformity with another's opinion is related to feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions. However, it is not clear which is the main factor of this relationship.

Therefore, the above results and discussion indicate that we should focus on reducing students' feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions and on familiarizing them with expressing their true intentions, when we design and implement communication activities.

However, a limitation of the current study should be mentioned. This study was conducted among only two classes, resulting in a small group of students. As a continuous study, we need to target more students with the same major and investigate further.

Conclusion

As a basic study of the communication activities with the system we have been developing, we investigated the affective factors related to student conformity by conducting a questionnaire with 81 Japanese university students in two classes (i.e., 40 in Engineering class and 41 in Business Administration class).

The results showed that: (1) there was no significant relationship between student conformity with another's opinion and nervousness during face-to-face English communication in either of two classes, while there was a weak relationship between student conformity and negative attitudes toward listening/speaking in English only in the Business Administration class; (2) in both classes, moderate relationships existed between student conformity and indirect ways of self-expression, as well as feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions.

These results suggest that there exists no significant relationship between student conformity with another's opinion and nervousness during face-to-face English communication. However, from the detailed analyses, it is assumed that some factors

exist between them. We need to investigate further by targeting more students. The results and analyses also suggest that indirect ways of self-expression may be one of the factors which slightly influences student conformity with the opinions of others. Meanwhile, student conformity with another's opinion is related to feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions. However, it is not clear which is the main factor of this relationship.

Therefore, the above results and discussion indicate that we should consider the way of reducing students' feelings of apprehension regarding the possible rejection of their opinions and of familiarizing them with expressing their true intentions, when we design and implement communication activities.

Given the limitations of the data, we will continue to investigate further.

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