

Stimulus Appraisal and Integrative Motivation in Required Freshman English Courses: Reasons and Implications

Jeff Stevenson

At the time of this writing, I have been living and teaching English at Asia University (AU) in Tokyo, Japan, for approximately two years. During this time I have made several interesting observations regarding AU students and their interest in learning the English language, as well as their intentions to seek contact with native English speakers, and to learn more about native English speakers and the various cultures they may represent.

I decided to conduct a survey in order to measure incoming Freshmen students' appraisal of the English language, their attitudes towards further study of English, their willingness or eagerness in seeking out opportunities to interact with native speakers, and their subjective attitudes towards the people of one specific English speaking culture: America. I will then explore any correlations between said attitudes and their placement in their respective Freshman English levels.

In preparing this study, I suspected that when compared with students from a lower level in the same academic major, higher level students would demonstrate more positive attitudes towards continued study of English, would be more eager to seek out opportunities to speak with native speakers and learn more about them, would be more prone to study the language outside the context of the university, and might have more favorable subjective opinions about American native speakers of English; thus, the implication of my hypothesis was that the attitudes and motivational levels of our students are to a great degree predetermined before they participate in Freshman English, and are reflected in their placement scores. This would lead to the conclusion that the higher the level of students one is teaching, the more motivated learners they will be. Subjectively, many of the CELE teachers of Asia University have voiced similar opinions. I will quantify some of those observations in this paper.

The theoretical underpinnings of this paper are primarily based on the work of Dr. John H. Schumann, with additional support coming from the research of Robert Gardner. Schumann (1997) points out that while all normal children will acquire at least one language to the degree that we would term "native," success in post-critical second language acquisition varies tremendously. Schumann states that "emotion underlies most, if not all cognition, and. . . variable success in second language acquisition (SLA) is emotionally driven" (xv). Many learners quite simply see no need or usefulness in learning certain foreign languages. Schumann states that, indeed, integrative motivation is at the core of successful second language acquisition. Schumann explains that "successful learners would be those who wanted to get to know, speak with, and perhaps become like speakers of the target language" (xvii) and that learners are seeking to fulfill sociostatic needs, defined as "the innate tendencies of the human organism to seek out interaction with conspecifics . . . the inherited drives for attachment and social affiliation" (3). This would

imply that by striving not only to pass a required English course, but also to improve one's ability to communicate in said language, students would be doing so with the expectation in mind that this will enable them to interact with native English speaking individuals. We would then predict that students at lower levels would be less inclined to seek out opportunities to communicate with native speakers. Their motivation to learn the language and the energy that we can expect them to put forth in the classroom may be minimal.

Another interesting construct of Schumann's theory is that of an additional value system called somatic value (4). As he explains, it is an "extension of the sociostatic process called social referencing . . . which teaches the child what to feel about his physical and social environment. This influences the development of an internalized system in the infant that can appraise the personal and emotional meaning of any particular environmental event" (4). We must keep in mind that some people may simply have had such negative language learning experiences in the past that their desire to continue studying has been crushed like a butterfly under a semi-truck. That is to say, if a student has succeeded in language study in the past, has been praised and received reinforcing positive feedback, then they may be drawn to language classes not so much as a means of increasing their ability to interact with foreigners, but simply as a way to receive personal gratification in being able to complete academic work in one area more successfully than another. On the other hand, a student repeatedly told or led to believe that they are "not good at language," will probably have certain mental impediments that will lead them to avoid an experience that simply promises to reinforce these feelings of failure. In the present study, however, I hope to focus on any correlations that exist between actually planning to use the language in an attempt to get to know more native English speakers, positive attitudes towards the English speaking cultures, and their placement in our Freshman English program.

Herein lies my primary interest in Schumann's theory: our classrooms are incredibly homogeneous. Most students are recent high school graduates (18 to 19 years of age), ethnically Japanese, and perhaps more importantly, all have been exposed to a relatively uniform experience regarding the learning of English. Students are required to take six years of English in high school, with a focus on grammar/translation over listening and speaking.

However, even given this great degree of homogeneity, the incoming students display equally incredible differences in ability levels, especially in speaking and listening. It is these differences that I seek to account for. Japan, needless to say, is an island nation, and in general terms, displays elements of a certain "insular" mentality. While big cities like Tokyo have a substantial number of foreigners, in general Japan is still primarily "Japanese." Most of our students, unless they go out of their way to do so, will have very little contact with foreigners in Japan. Most will not spend extended periods of time abroad, and those that do will do so primarily for touristic purposes. So in effect, the need to learn and "master" English is simply not there for most of our students. Could it be then that the differences we see in incoming students' ability levels are related to the degree of

integrative motivation the students possess? To what extent do our students value the characteristics of target language speakers (xvii)? To what extent are the students motivated by an interest in native English speakers? In this paper I seek to measure that motivation and see to what extent it reflects their placement in Asia University's 21 different levels of Freshman English. Schumann cautions that acculturation is very difficult to measure, and that in any individual, acculturation may change over time. However, with these caveats in mind certain trends will become apparent.

The Survey

To measure the aforementioned variables, I chose 24 questions from the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) as developed by Gardner (1985). I then had these questions translated into Japanese, not wanting comprehension difficulties to get in the way of the measurement procedure. According to teacher feedback, the questionnaire took from ten to fifteen minutes to complete. Students were informed, again in Japanese, at the head of the questionnaire that their teacher would not see the answers they provided and were encouraged to answer as honestly as possible. For the purposes of this paper I chose to sample from the Freshman English classes of two American teachers. I took the answers from the International Relations and Law majors. The teachers taught the highest (IR 1, Law 1) and lowest levels (IR 10, Law 21) of Freshman English, respectively.

The first five questions were designed to measure the appeal of learning English. These were multiple choice questions with three possible answers. Students had to choose the one answer that best reflected how they felt concerning the question/situation. These first five questions and the possible responses are listed below, as well as comments indicating whether the theory was supported or not.

1) If I had the opportunity to speak English outside of school, I would:

a) never speak

IR 1: (0) 0%

LAW 1: (1) 8%

IR 10: (0) 0%

LAW 21: (0) 0%

THEORY?: NO

b) speak English most of the time, using Japanese only if really necessary.

IR 1: (13) 100%

LAW 1: (8) 62%

IR 10 (4) 44%

LAW 21: (3) 27%

THEORY?: YES

c) speak it occasionally, using Japanese whenever possible.

IR 1: (0) 0%

LAW 1: (4) 31%

IR 10 (5) 56%

LAW 21: (8) 73%

THEORY?: YES

2) If there were an English club in my school, I would:

a) attend meetings once in a while

IR 1: (9) 69%

LAW 1: (9) 69%

IR 10 (1) 11%

LAW 21: (3) 27%

THEORY?: YES

b) be most interested in joining
IR 1: (3) 23% IR 10 (0) 0% THEORY?: YES
LAW 1: (1) 8% LAW 21: (0) 0%

c) definitely not join
IR 1: (1) 8% IR 10 (8) 89% THEORY?: YES
LAW 1: (3) 23% LAW 21: (8) 73 %

3) If it were up to me whether or not to take English, I:

a) would definitely not take it
IR 1: (1) 8% IR 10: (1) 11% THEORY?: YES
LAW 1: (2) 15% LAW 21: (2) 18%

b) would take it
IR 1: (11) 85% IR 10: (4) 44% THEORY?: YES
LAW 1: (8) 62% LAW 21: (5) 45%

c) don't know if I would take it or not
IR 1: (1) 8% IR 10: (4) 44% THEORY?: YES
LAW 1: (3) 23% LAW 21: (4) 36%

4) If there were English speaking families in my neighborhood, I would:

a) never speak English with them
IR 1: (0) 0% IR 10: (1) 11% THEORY?: YES
LAW 1: (0) 0% LAW 21: (1) 9%

b) speak English with them sometimes
IR 1: (2) 15% IR 10: (3) 33% THEORY?: NO
LAW 1: (5) 35% LAW 21: (5) 45%

c) speak English with them as much as possible
IR 1: (11) 85% IR 10: (5) 56% THEORY?: YES
LAW 1: (8) 62% LAW 21: (4) 36%

5) If English were not taught in school, I would:

a) pick up English in everyday situations (i.e. read English books and newspapers, try to speak it whenever possible, etc.).
IR 1: (6) 46% IR 10: (1) 11% THEORY?: YES
LAW 1: (6) 46% LAW 21: (3) 27%

b) not bother learning English at all
IR 1: (0) 0% IR 10: (8) 89% THEORY?: YES
LAW 1: (1) 8% LAW 21: (5) 45%

c) try to obtain lessons in English somewhere else
IR 1: (5) 38% IR 10: (0) 0% THEORY?: YES
LAW 1: (6) 46% LAW 21: (3) 27%

If we take a closer look at the survey results we see that there is indeed a strong correlation between placement level and attitudes that could be considered positive in the pursuit of learning English to a high communicative level. It is interesting to note that among the lower of the two levels both the International Relations students (89%) and the Law students (45%) stated that given the choice they would “not bother learning English at all.” Additionally, we see that in the higher levels, we can expect students to seek out opportunities to interact with native English speakers and to try to use English as much as possible as the means of communication during such interactions. What is more, as any successful learning of a language involves not only time spent in class but hours of self-motivated study outside of class, we see that the higher level students will be more inclined to undertake this kind of activity (question 5).

The next 19 questions of the survey were designed to assess the subjective attitudes students have of the native speakers of the language, their desire to interact with them, and finally a set of negatively worded questions designed to reflect global attitudes toward continued study of English, much in the same way as the first 5 questions. The students were to respond using a Likert scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) according to how strongly they agreed with the statement in question.

For the purposes of this paper I worded the questions using “Americans” where “native English speakers” might have also been used. The students surveyed had Americans as teachers, and within the university’s study abroad programs, if a student decides to study English abroad, it will be at an American university. After collecting the questionnaire data, I chose twelve questions at random that would reflect different aspects of Schumann’s theory that “successful learners would be those who wanted to get to know, speak with, and perhaps become like speakers of the target language” (xvii). Upon closer inspection of the data, it became apparent that sometimes the mean score would support the theory but the median score would not, or vice versa. In order to avoid bias, I include both. At the end of each line of data pluses and minuses are shown as to whether the mean and median supported the theory or not, or showed no difference. As before, I focused on the same students from the highest and lowest levels of International Relations and Law. In general, teachers tend to say that International Relations students are “better” than Law students. This is of course a subjective judgment, based on Western teachers’ expectations of a good language learner. However, according to the aforementioned theory, differences in positive responses should be able to be seen between any levels of any major. Let us consider a few of the survey questions:

Questions designed to assess integrative motivation

1) I would like to know more Americans.

LAW 1: Mean: 4.3	Median: 5	LAW 21: Mean: 3.5	Median: 3.5	+/+
IR 1: Mean: 4.9	Median: 5	IR 10: Mean: 3.7	Median: 4	+/+

2) The more I get to know Americans, the more I want to be fluent in their language.

LAW 1: Mean: 4.5 Median: 5 LAW 21: Mean: 3.5 Median: 3.5 + / +
IR 1: Mean: 4.6 Median: 5 IR 10: Mean: 4.4 Median: 5 + / same

3) I would like to get to know American people better.

LAW 1: Mean: 3.2 Median: 3 LAW 21: Mean: 3.8 Median: 4 - / -
IR 1: Mean: 4.4 Median: 4.4 IR 10: Mean: 3.9 Median: 5 + / -

We can see from the data that 2 of the 3 questions seem to demonstrate a correlation between a higher FE placement level and levels of integrative motivation.

Students' attitudes towards Americans in general

4) I have always admired Americans.

LAW 1: Mean: 2.5 Median: 3 LAW 21: Mean: 2.4 Median: 2 + / +
IR 1: Mean: 2.5 Median: 3 IR 10: Mean: 3.2 Median: 3 - / same

5) I have a favorable attitude toward Americans.

LAW 1: Mean: 3.5 Median: 3 LAW 21: Mean: 3.3 Median: 4 + / -
IR 1: Mean: 4 Median: 4 IR 10: Mean: 3.4 Median: 4 + / same

The data show a slight tendency for a correlation between a higher FE placement level and levels of general positive attitudes towards Americans.

Subjective attitudes towards Americans regarding personality traits

6) Americans are very sociable, warm hearted and creative people.

LAW 1: Mean: 3.6 Median: 4 LAW 21: Mean: 3.4 Median: 4 + / same
IR 1: Mean: 3.5 Median: 4 IR 10: Mean: 3.2 Median: 3 + / +

7) American people are considerate of the feelings of others.

LAW 1: Mean: 3.1 Median: 3 LAW 21: Mean: 3.1 Median: 3 same/same
IR 1: Mean: 3.3 Median: 3 IR 10: Mean: 3 Median: 3 + / same

8) Americans are trustworthy and dependable.

LAW 1: Mean: 2.8 Median: 3 LAW 21: Mean: 2.8 Median: 3 same/same
IR 1: Mean: 3.1 Median: 3 IR 10: Mean: 3.3 Median: 3 - / same

9) Americans are always friendly and hospitable.

LAW 1: Mean: 3.6 Median: 4 LAW 21: Mean: 3.7 Median: 4 - / same

IR 1: Mean: 3.8 Median: 4

IR 10: Mean: 4.3 Median: 4 - / same

It is interesting to note that the data are almost identical between levels of the same major for these questions. However, if we take up the last set of questions regarding students' feelings regarding the English language, the study of English, and their intent to continue studying English upon graduation, the difference between levels becomes again significant.

10) I hate English.

LAW 1: Mean: 1.9 Median: 1

LAW 21: Mean: 3.3 Median: 3.5 + / +

IR 1: Mean: 1.5 Median: 1

IR 10: Mean: 2.6 Median: 3 + / +

11) I think that learning English is dull.

LAW 1: Mean: 1.8 Median: 1

LAW 21: Mean: 2.4 Median: 2 + / +

IR 1: Mean: 1.4 Median: 1

IR 10: Mean: 2.6 Median: 2.5 + / +

12) When I leave school, I shall give up the study of English entirely because I am not interested in it.

LAW 1: Mean: 1.4 Median: 1

LAW 21: Mean: 2.5 Median: 2.5 + / +

IR 1: Mean: 1.4 Median: 1

IR 10: Mean: 1.8 Median: 2 + / +

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can state that there is indeed a correlation between a higher level of Freshman English placement and motivation to continue learning the language. We can expect students from higher levels to be more motivated in their study of the language outside of class. Higher level students will also seek out more opportunities not only to practice their English skills with native speakers, but can be said to be more interested in learning more about native English speakers and forming relationships with them. As the data shows, many of the students at the lower levels will not be motivated in their study of the language, for given the chance, they would abandon further study of the language altogether. However, the data of this study fails to support the notion that there should be a correlation between positive subjective attitudes towards certain personality traits of native speakers and Freshman English level placement. In summation, we can deduce that students placed in higher levels of Freshman English will be more motivated learners in general, will be studying in order to interact and form relationships with native speakers, but will not be doing so because they are more inclined to think the native speakers (in our study, Americans) possess positive personality characteristics.

A Note to Freshman English teachers

The purpose of this study has not been to demean students at the lower levels of the Freshman English program. Students have different priorities. Some students will benefit

more from their English instruction in Freshman English than others. There is nothing inherently wrong, either, in not seeking out relationships with people from other cultures and with people who speak a different language. However, I do believe that teachers at the lower levels of the program should keep in mind that they are most likely dealing with students who will not be self-motivated language learners, independent of the quality of the teacher. Expectations of what these students will produce both inside class and out should be realistic.

As we saw from the survey data, students from the highest and lowest levels of two majors attributed no more positive personality characteristics to Americans depending on FE placement level. Low motivation in a lower level class or even outright disapproval of the class on the part of students will tend not to be a reflection of the teacher as a person, teacher, or representative of the native English speaking culture. This is to say it shouldn't be taken personally if there is a problem with motivation at the lower levels. It is the position of this paper that some of those negative motivational attitudes are in place before students even arrive in our classrooms, and are reflected in their placement scores.

Lastly, the university is in the process of trying to test the "success" of the Freshman English program through post-program evaluations. I would caution against taking the results as indications of the effectiveness of a teacher's abilities without considering the findings of this study.

References

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