

Working Memory Capacity and Motivation in Japanese English as a Foreign Language Learners' Speaking Skills

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Abstract : Although the effects of working memory capacity on second/foreign language speaking skills have been researched in depth, few studies have focused on Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) learners as compared to other languages (Indo-European languages), and the sample sizes of the relevant Japanese studies have been relatively small. Furthermore, comparing the effects of working memory capacity and motivation which is another kind of frequently researched individual factor on L2 speaking skills would add to the scholarly literature in the field of second language acquisition research. Therefore, the purposes of this study were to investigate whether working memory capacity and motivation have significant relationships with Japanese EFL learners' speaking skills and to investigate the degree to which working memory capacity and motivation contribute to their English speaking skills. One-hundred and ten Japanese EFL students aged 18 to 26 years participated in this study. All of them are native Japanese speakers and have learned English as a foreign language for 6 to 15. They completed the Versant English speaking test, which has been widely used to measure non-native speakers' English speaking skills, two types of working memory tests (the L1-based backward digit span test and the L1-based listening span test), and the language learning motivation survey. The researcher designed the working memory tests and the motivation survey. To investigate the relationship between the variables (English speaking skills, working memory capacity, and language learning motivation), a correlation analysis was conducted, which showed that L2 speaking test scores were significantly related to both working memory capacity and language learning motivation, although the correlation coefficients were weak. Furthermore, a multiple regression analysis was performed, with L2 speaking skills as the dependent variable and working memory capacity and language learning motivation as the independent variables. The results showed that working memory capacity and motivation significantly explained the variance in L2 speaking skills and that the L2 motivation had slightly larger effects on the L2 speaking skills than the working memory capacity. Although this study includes several limitations, the results could contribute to the generalization of the effects of individual differences, such as working memory and motivation on L2 learning, in the literature.

Keywords : individual differences, motivation, speaking skills, working memory

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