

Instructors' Backgrounds and Learner Attitudes in Japan:

A Pilot Study of Two Universities

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Abstract

In recent years, Japanese universities have begun to expand their English programs and employ more native speakers of English in order to give their students better opportunities to improve their English as well as to promote internationalization. Each native instructor brings with them their own unique cultural background, experience, philosophy and ideas to the classroom. This paper presents the results of a pilot study of a group of students from two Japanese universities and reveals their expectations regarding teaching practice and their engagement in English learning and how it affects their attitudes and motivation toward learning the language. A focus group approach was employed in order to allow the participants to engage freely with one another, with minimal restriction or intervention from the interviewers. The results established that irrespective of the university location, environment, or instructor's nationality or background, the learners displayed similar types of anxiety towards English study, with much of it connected to their past experiences or exposure to the types of English teachers they had, *before* they matriculated. It is therefore recommended that university administrators and policy makers take into account that students will likely have anxiety towards English at the tertiary level, and undertake efforts to implement necessary measures and strategies to create less stressful learning environments.

Introduction

In recent years there have been numerous action plans undertaken by the Japanese government to improve students' English ability, with the latest designed to improve the communication ability of students (MEXT, 2003). At the tertiary level, there is now more choice than ever before, with an array of courses and programs having been put into place to provide students with a greater exposure to English. Although English is still mostly taught by native Japanese speakers at high schools in Japan, native speakers are now preferred by universities, especially the larger prestigious ones. As a result, it is at the tertiary level where

Japanese students are often exposed to native English teachers' courses for the first time, environments in which they are expected to deal with not only the course content taught purely in English, but the fact that instruction and other communication with their teacher will be carried out in English. Indeed, many native English instructors are unable to communicate fluently enough in Japanese, or many universities simply insist that all communication is carried out in English, even if the instructor happens to be able to communicate fluently in Japanese. These native English teachers also exhibit differences in their teaching focuses and instructional styles (Kawamura, 2011) which are quite different to those that students have been ordinarily exposed to in high school, in classes taught by native Japanese teachers in environments which tend to focus on preparing for examinations, with little focus on studying for general communication purposes. In such situations, how should Japanese tertiary students be expected to cope, and how do their teachers' cultural backgrounds and differing expectations affect motivation and attitudes toward learning?

Background to the Study

In present day Japan, most young people study compulsory English classes as part of the school curriculum for at least six years: three years in junior high school (aged 13-15), and three years in senior high school (aged 16-18). And, in recent years, although the Japanese government has also introduced English into the elementary curriculum, classes are limited to less than an hour a week, and are treated more as cultural learning exchanges. Therefore, most students will have been exposed to some formal English education since at least elementary school (aged 6-12), for a total of at least seven years, should they graduate from high school. According to the Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Culture and Technology (MEXT), 54% of high-school graduates now enter university (MEXT, 2017), and there they will have at least another year of compulsory English education. However, despite this focus on English education, extraordinarily, by the time they graduate from university, most Japanese young people still lack the skills and confidence to use English, especially in speaking, and display signs of anxiety, which negatively affects their motivation (MacWhinnie & Mitchell, 2017; Edwards, 2012).

According to Kachru's Concentric Circles of English (1996, p. 2), English in Japan belongs to an 'expanding' circle which includes countries such as China, Saudi Arabia and Russia, as opposed to the Outer Circle of post-colonial countries such as Kenya, India, Malaysia. Compared to the Inner Circle countries of native speaking populations, such as the UK and the USA, numbers of fluent speakers in the expanding circle countries remains low. Indeed, international English test comparisons still show Japan to be well below most other expanding circle countries (EPI, 2017). In Outer Circle countries, English is mainly used for international communication, such as in business, diplomacy and tourism (Mckenzie, p. 269). English in Japan is therefore categorized in the Expanding Circle, and does not have the status of an offi-

cial language (Mckenzie, p. 269), which means that there is little incentive for students to take study seriously. And in recent years, in spite of the efforts of the Japanese government to "globalise" education by introducing compulsory English programs or through numerous other initiatives such as the Top Global University Project, which was launched in 2014, with the aim to, "enhance the international compatibility and competitiveness of higher education in Japan." (JSPS, n.d.), Japanese students will not usually be required to use English in the workplace, nor will it be necessary in their daily lives. The result is that there is less incentive for them to take it seriously.

Against this background of a mono-lingual society in which English remains unnecessary for most, in recent times, although government policy guidelines have been promoting a communicative approach to English language teaching, it is often pointed out how in practice the opposite is true. For example, English classes at the high school level remain concentrated on reading, writing and grammar, rather than on speaking and listening skills, in order to prepare students for the English component of the university entrance examinations, which leads to the situation in which most Japanese students enter tertiary institutions with limited speaking and listening skills (McArthur, 2003, p. 21; Japan Times, 2015). And at the tertiary level, at most four year universities, students have to study at least one foreign language as a compulsory subject, which is almost always English. Liberal arts professors and language instructors often teach the classes, as well as professors of linguistics, and most of the teachers are Japanese. Classes are often large, and many students are not so keen on English to begin with, as it is not their major subject. In addition, they are often only required to meet once or twice a week for classes. Thus, at the tertiary level, instructors often have to deal with students who are likely to be unmotivated, and who display resistance in the classroom, particularly when it comes to the study of compulsory English.

To date, there have been few studies on Japanese learner's attitudes toward learning English with regard to their teachers, and how teacher background might affect their motivation inside and outside the classroom at the tertiary level. The idea that the best teachers of English to students in Asia are native English teachers is challenged by Walkinshaw and Oanh (2014), who found that native English speaking teachers (NESTs) were valued as models for authentic and natural pronunciation in a study on Vietnamese and Japanese students' attitudes toward their teachers' backgrounds. According to their findings, students appreciated how non-NESTs could code-switch and explain complex grammar (p. 7). In another study by Kawamura (2012) on how students perceived their classes taught by Japanese and NESTs and the effectiveness of their learning, it was found that students tended to perceive compulsory classes as effective, by either NESTs or NNESTs, but preferred being taught reading and writing by Japanese teachers, and listening speaking by NESTs, and displayed signs of higher motivation in their classes that were taught by NESTs.

This study will explore student attitudes toward English at two different universities, each of which offers a different English teaching environment. The first is a small private uni-

versity, which does not employ NESTs to teach English classes, and the second is a prestigious private university, in which students are exposed to a variety of courses taught in English, almost entirely by NESTs. How do teachers' backgrounds at these two universities affect student anxiety and motivation toward learning English, and what are students' attitudes toward learning English as a product of their learning environment?

Method

University A is located in a major urban area, and University B, in a rural area. At University A, students major in welfare and English is compulsory (but elective courses are offered). At University B, students also major in welfare related subjects, and must take a foreign language as a compulsory subject, although most of them choose English. Two focus group interviews were carried out with students at each university, on two separate occasions. The researchers employed a qualitative approach for this study. According to Merriam (1998):

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world... qualitative research can reveal how all the parts work together to form a whole. It is assumed that meaning is embedded in people's experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator's own perceptions (p.6).

Data for this study was gathered employing the focus group interview methodology. Focus groups as interview formats have been used in social research for more than 60 years, and this qualitative data gathering methodology is one of the most popular research methods employed today (Gavora, 2015). A focus group is a type of interview in which participants express their ideas and perspectives on a topic in a group setting, with the idea that data is generated from the communication between the participants. The focus group method explicitly seeks interaction between the different participants, with the researcher retreating to the peripheral, so as to allow them to interact among themselves as much as possible through asking questions, commentating on each other's experiences and ensuring different points of view are garnered. In focus groups, the researchers act as moderators to ensure that the interaction is smooth and all participants are comprehending each other (Gavora, 2015).

Through employing the focus group methodology for this study, the authors hoped to gauge their students' experiences and perspectives toward their English teachers and establish whether the type of teacher affected their motivation, in a relaxed atmosphere, free from interviewer bias or other negative influencing factors. Kirzinger (1995) points out several other key advantages of focus groups: 1) They can encourage participation by those who would be reluctant to be interviewed on their own (formal interviews with teachers can be in-

timidating for students). 2) They encourage contributions from those who feel they might have nothing to say, or might be shy, or “unresponsive” but more comfortable in a less formal, peer-group setting. The focus group interview requires coordination of the participants to ensure that the conversation stays on track and relevant ideas are communicated successfully among the participants.

Before initiating the focus group interviews, the authors explained the purpose of the research to the participants in an easy to understand manner, so as to minimize unnecessary stress and the possibility that some of them might change their responses, or manipulate the conversation to meet the researchers' expectations. This was followed by acquiring ethical consent, established through open dialogue. It is crucial to take ethics into account, especially for this type of research (Kitamura, 2017). Participants were then provided with a general, open-ended discussion topic to get them started, stated in a simple, straight-forward manner: “We would like to know about your experiences learning English. You can talk about your curriculum, teachers, or about anything else you wish to add.”

The first focus group interview took place at University B in November 2016. Five students participated and it lasted for an hour and forty-five minutes. The second focus group interview was undertaken at University A in December, 2016. Eight students participated in the discussion (one student left earlier because of another appointment) and the interview lasted around ninety minutes. During both interviews, one female NNEST (Japanese), and one male NEST were present as facilitators. The participants participated in the focus groups at their own accord for the discussion. They were recruited using the snowball method, in which one person known to the facilitator is asked to find a friend (or friends) to join, and so on. In the end the participants decide the composition of the focus group members on their own accord. This method was employed to minimize bias on who should join the focus group, and to provide a relaxing atmosphere in which the participants would feel comfortable to engage their discussions in. Moreover, at both universities, the focus groups were carried out in spaces familiar to the participants, at places of their choosing. At University B, this turned out to be classroom that was familiar to the participants; University A participants chose the student cafeteria since it was a quiet time of day and they could drink beverages whilst they held the discussion.

Results

Both interviews were transcribed. Open coding analysis was used to divide the data into incidents, patterns and categories were developed and the results compared. A category is defined by Glaser (1978, p. 38) as a “higher level of abstraction and consists of a concept or concepts”. Memos were compiled from the data, so as to provide clear comparisons. Memo-writing helps to develop ideas and focused codes (Charmas, 2006) and is a productive strategy (Dowling and Brown, 2010, p. 86).

From the coding and memo writing, it became apparent that the students' motivation to learn English was affected by their instructor was a NEST or a NNEST, regardless of the tertiary institution or their level. From the focus group data of both groups, the same patterns were apparent. Regarding past exposure to NESTS, positive indications were that the students felt they were awarded a certain amount of freedom to express themselves within the classroom: "I feel that Japanese teachers want the right answer, and foreign teachers allow for mistakes." They also felt they had to answer in English when requested by NESTS: "I try and speak to foreign teachers when they ask me to." Regarding NNESTs, students were constantly anxious, in that they felt they had to use perfect English grammar and (but not necessarily pronunciation) when carrying out exercises in the classroom: "I feel as if I must reply using perfect grammar when answering questions from Japanese teachers".

However, other issues that became apparent were that students were negatively affected by teacher background in that with NESTS, several felt that they struggled to understand what the teacher was talking about: "Since I have no idea what foreign teachers are talking about, I lose motivation." Another said that they felt uncomfortable communicating with NESTS: "I feel uncomfortable when foreign teachers can't speak Japanese and I need to ask them something." Yet another said, "When we get homework, we often have no idea what it means, and so ask each other, rather than the teacher, because they probably won't understand us."

At University B, one participant had taken weekly English conversation classes since kindergarten, and was thus more comfortable and mentioned that they were not anxious in most situations, regardless of whether they had NEST or NNESTs. However, the other students all mentioned that their experience of learning English had been similar to that of the participants in the focus group interview at University A: their first exposure to English had been in primary school (years 5 and 6), and even then, it had been limited to so called foreign language activities held once a week during term. They had then moved on to the formal English study curriculum for six years, beginning from junior high school and going through to senior high school, before graduating and entering university.

At University A, one student had studied in an English speaking country for a year during high school and another had attended a Japanese high school in an English speaking country for almost three years. There was also one international student present, from another Asian country, which has similar cultural values to Japan. Students in the group (including the international student) had all begun learning English when they were around year five at primary school (12 years old) as foreign language activities, once a week, before moving onto the formal English curriculum through junior high school and senior high school for six years.

Discussion

Through the data obtained from the focus groups across both universities, irrespective of

the level or location of the university, all the students mentioned that they felt anxiety within the classroom, with much of this depending on the extent of their past experiences and exposure to NESTs or NNESTs. All participants said that they felt peace of mind with NNESTs; even the higher-level participants. According to them, it was simply easier to converse in Japanese when presented with the opportunity, since it would avoid any potential misunderstandings regarding instructions or the like that they felt they might miss when speaking to a NEST. Students even went to lengths to avoid asking NESTs to repeat instructions if they felt they had missed something. It was mentioned that rather than approaching NESTs for clarification of work in the class or instructions regarding assignments they would rather sort things out among themselves, often using social media group sites where they could offer each other mutual support. It can be deduced that asking questions to the teacher is a cultural concern, and learners are influenced by their experiences of English education that they had before entering university.

Regarding NESTs who spoke Japanese within the classroom, both groups of participants confirmed that NESTs who spoke fluent Japanese, and who were willing to do so within the classroom, especially to clarify certain points, or to give detailed instructions, made them feel at ease. The participants were very happy to converse in Japanese within the classroom when presented with the opportunity. In fact, NESTs who refused to speak Japanese (or couldn't speak Japanese) made the participants anxious and nervous about their own learning ability, and caused them to lose confidence and motivation to learn English.

Future challenges and Conclusion

From the results of this pilot study, the authors believe that it is necessary for tertiary institutions in Japan to provide more comfortable English learning environments for their students. First, universities should provide learning environments in which students are encouraged to "use" the language practically. It was established that the teaching environment affects students, according to whether courses are taught by NESTs or by NNESTs. The authors consider that university administrators and course planners should take into account differences in teaching approaches between NESTs and NNESTs. Interestingly, even the more advanced students seemed more comfortable dealing with NNESTs, especially when having to deal with instructions and clarification of materials in the classroom. It is therefore vital that university administrators and course designers take into account student anxiety when planning and distributing courses among NESTs and NNESTs, and perhaps allow for the use of Japanese use in the classroom, or to employ NESTs that are capable of dealing with students in Japanese, where appropriate. We also believe it is essential to mitigate against making students nervous in their first experiences with NESTs, which would mean re-examining the way English is taught during the first six-years of exposure, at least from junior high school. Students need to be familiar with dealing with instructions and

course explanations in English right from their first years of exposure to English education, and encouraged to express their opinions orally in the classroom, in order to avoid anxiety once they attend English classes at a university. Finally, teachers themselves, especially NESTS, need to be aware of student anxiety, and its causes. There needs to be an association and efficient link with English education at the junior and senior high school and perhaps even right from the primary school level. Policy makers and school administrations should work together to develop more practical teaching approaches specifically designed at reducing anxiety and a lack of confidence in using English among students. Establishing an environment which promotes motivation and the desire to use English is essential. Finally, English education at the tertiary level in Japan should be used as a gateway to expand possibilities, rather than as it is currently, where students are exposed to a “harsh” environment which does not encourage them to better themselves.

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