

The Impact of Foreign Asian Students in Japanese University EFL Classrooms

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Bio Data

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Abstract

This study examines the effects and implications of inviting foreign Asian students to Japanese university EFL classes. Foreign students invited to EFL classes are defined here as a possible source of a "real audience" which is characterized by having a real information gap. The participants in this study consisted of 68 students registered in required English classes at a Japanese university and 10 Asian students from China, Vietnam, and South Korea. The Japanese students made presentations in front of the foreign guests using presentation software, and dealt with subsequent comments, questions, and discussion in English. A qualitative analysis of post-activity

questionnaires revealed that the program had a positive effect on motivation and performance. Results provide key implications toward developing a Communicative Language Teaching curriculum that addresses the needs of Japanese EFL students.

Introduction

In 2004, more than 11,000 foreign students were studying in Japanese colleges and schools, with 93.4% of them from Asian countries. Sakaguchi (2005) notes that a new type of college course has appeared in which both Japanese and foreign students study in the same classroom. Some are Japanese language classes for foreign students where Japanese students attend as guests, while in other classes, both groups discuss topics concerning Japanese culture and history, or conduct collaborative research. However, this movement has yet to find its way to Japanese college-level EFL classes.

The program described in this paper seeks to fill this gap by placing foreign guests in Japanese EFL classrooms. It is a part of collaborative project to develop a curriculum called the Event-Driven Curriculum (EDC). We have instituted several programs as a part of EDC: cooking projects with foreign students, open-class presentations, the English Department Festival and so on. We define foreign students invited to EFL classes as a possible source of a "real audience" which is characterized by having a real information gap, thereby enhancing students' motivation and confidence.

Many Japanese have a stereotypical image about English instructors or English speakers in general; they should be Caucasian, ideally American or British. We would argue that a "real audience" or members of an L2 community do not have to be native English speakers. Over the last two terms we have attempted to improve the students' English and broaden the image of English as an international language by

inviting non-native, non-western, college-age Asian students to be an audience for our students' presentations.

Literature Review

McKay (2003) suggests that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) may not fit in straightforwardly with Asian educational culture. A number of studies have compared the communicative behavior of Japanese with those of other cultures. Ishii (1984) says that Japanese are relatively quiet and reserved, and expect listeners to read their minds. Japanese speak less compared with Americans (Geatz, Ishii, & Kropf, 1990), and show less self-disclosure (Barnlund, 1975, 1989). Niikura (1999) reports that the assertiveness of Japanese was the lowest when compared with Malaysians, Filipinos, and Americans. Iwawaki, Eysenck, and Eysenck (1977) also observed that Japanese are more introverted than British people. In classrooms, Japanese students are sometimes characterized as passive, introverted, unmotivated, inactive and unresponsive (Hadley and Evans, 2001; King, 2005).

Previous studies that have investigated reticence to speak (Tsui, 1996; Burns & Joyce, 1997; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Nation, 2003) advocate creating a relatively stress-free classroom learning environment in order to encourage target language use. However, Doi (1971) warns that some Japanese students will have a tendency to underperform when they are coddled by a "kind" teacher. We propose here that if those same students know they will be performing in front of an audience that is not made up of the same classmates they see every day, there could be a marked improvement in motivation and classroom performance.

Clement and Kruidenier (1983) identified several factors that could affect motivational orientations. Particularly relevant to our study was the opportunity for immediate sociocultural contact with members of the L2 community, especially in unicultural settings. Gardner and Lambert (1972) also suggest "an urgency about mastering a second language" (p. 141) that the presence of members of the L2 group in the learning environment could influence motivational orientations when there exists "an urgency about mastering a foreign language."

Based on the preceding studies and our own observations, we determined that some device was necessary to stimulate Japanese students to communicate more actively along with a curriculum that addressed the needs of Japanese students. It was hypothesized the presence of a "real audience with a built-in information gap" would have an impact on Japanese students in terms of motivation and effort to communicate in English.

The Research Questions

- 1) What difference do students find between speaking English with Asian students and speaking with Japanese students, or western native-speaking students/teachers in EFL classes?
- 2) What difference do students find between casual conversations with foreigners and making presentations?

Participants

Participants consisted of one class of 36 freshmen (18 males, 18 females) and one class of 32 juniors (10 males, 22 females) ranging in age from 18 to 20 years, registered in English classes in a Japanese university. They are non-English majors taking English as a required core subject. The course was held twice a week with a total of 25 90-minute periods a semester. Classes were held in a computer room with Internet access. Before the program, the students spoke English to each other for an average of 5 to 10 minutes in each class.

The foreign guests consisted of seven Chinese students for the freshman class, and one Chinese student, one Vietnamese student, and one South Korean student for the sophomore class. All the foreign students had been in Japan for just a few months, and none possessed fluency in Japanese.

The Program

Students were randomly put into groups of four. The program was conducted over seven class periods. Two periods were spent choosing topics and doing research using the Internet and Japanese culture textbooks. The following two periods were used for making presentation files and pairwork in English. The final two periods before the actual presentation were used to check the sentences of the students and do rehearsals of the presentations.

The Topics

Freshmen students: tea ceremony, Japanese sweets, Japanese history, traditional games for children, sushi, geisha, instant noodles, special dishes for the New Year's celebration, fermented soybeans, the oriental zodiac.

Sophomore students: origami, ayatori string game (cat's cradle), sushi, bean throwing festival, Japanese cooking, special dishes for the New Year celebration, Japanese oden stew, special New Year's soup, traditional festivals.

The Presentations

On the day of the presentations, one foreign student joined each group and rotated to other groups after each presentation concluded. The groups made their presentations using computer monitors to show the presentation files they had created. This was followed by a question and answer session and free conversation.

The Questionnaire

The following questionnaire was administered in Japanese after the presentations under the supervision of the students' English teacher.

1. What differences did you find between speaking English with Japanese students as done in past lessons and speaking with foreign students?
2. What difference did you find between casual conversations with foreigners and making presentations?
3. What difference did you find between speaking to western people and Asian people?
4. What difference did you find between speaking English with foreign students and speaking with foreign teachers?

Results

Responses for each questions were grouped into categories

Question 1: Differences between speaking English with Japanese students and speaking with foreign students. (See Table 1 in the Appendix for the complete list of responses)

1. Importance of grammatical knowledge (38 responses)
2. Importance of good pronunciation (21 responses)
3. Importance of gestures and body language (21)
4. Proficiency of foreign students (16)
5. Importance of appropriate expressions and visual aids (13)
6. Eagerness to speak English (12)
7. Cooperativeness of foreign students (12)
8. Anxiety to speak English (7)
9. Multi-cultural point of view (1)

Question 2: Differences between casual conversations with foreigners and making presentations. (See Table 2 in the Appendix for the complete list of responses)

1. Decreased anxiety and self-confidence (32)
2. One-sided conversations restricted to prepared topics (14)
3. Building vocabulary and sentence structure (11)
4. Meaningful content (11)
5. Realization of lack of information and vocabulary (8)

Question 3: Differences between talking to Westerners and Asians. (See Table 3 in the Appendix for the complete list of responses)

1. Sense of affinity (19)
2. Asian students easy-to-follow speaking speed (16)
3. Heavy Asian accents (13)
4. Limited use of difficult vocabulary to promote comprehension (9)
5. Asian character (3)

Question 4: Differences between speaking English with foreign students and speaking with foreign teachers. (See Table 4 in the Appendix for the complete list of responses)

1. Sense of affinity (33)
2. Desire to communicate (12)
3. Difficulty of making oneself understood (8)
4. Teacher error correction and vocabulary (4)
5. No difference in anxiety (6)

Discussion

The results are summarized as follows:

1. By making presentations to Asian students in English, our learners discovered the importance of grammatical competence (syntax, pronunciation, vocabulary) and strategic competence (gesture, body language, improvisation, visual aids, appropriate expressions).
2. By making presentations instead of having casual conversations, our learners experienced less anxiety and had more confidence in talking to foreign students. The answers also show that they developed their vocabulary and sentence structure in order to make presentations with content.
3. Our learners felt an affinity with Asian students for three reasons: being fellow Asians, being non-native speakers, and proximity of age. This sense of affinity could have contributed to them making a concentrated effort to communicate actively. The answers also show that the foreign students were viewed as good listeners with high proficiency and spoke more slowly than westerners, which made their language easier to understand. Finally, our learners were also impressed with the foreign students' attitudes and eagerness to understand to their presentations.
4. Negative responses had to do with one-sided conversations due to the nature of the program, inability to answer questions due to lack of detailed information, difficulty in understanding Asian students because of heavy accents, and having to avoid difficult words to make themselves understood.

Overall, the students' responses show that Asian students invited to Japanese college-level EFL classes have a significant impact on Japanese students thus proving

their value as a "real audience." Though they noticed differences in accent and vocabulary compared with native speakers, talking to Asian students made Japanese students realize that they themselves needed more grammar and pronunciation training to make themselves understood. They also realized the importance of gesture, body language, improvisation and visual aids.

The post-activity questionnaire also played an important role by having our learners reflect on their learning. They in effect became hands-on language researchers who carried out self-assessment and identified their strengths and weaknesses, thereby taking an active role in the learning process. Through this process, they learn to assume responsibility for their own learning and take a significant step towards the ultimate goal of becoming autonomous learners.

Concluding Remarks

Due to the small scale of this study, caution must be exercised about making claims about the efficacy of this program. However, as a preliminary investigation, we believe that the findings presented here are promising and warrant further investigation.

With some 1.7 billion non-native speakers of English in the world, EFL students will probably have more opportunities to talk to non-native speakers than to native speakers in their future (Crystal, 1985). The results of this study indicate that foreign Asian students can be an effective "real audience" or L2 community in Japanese EFL classes. Richards (2005) stresses the importance of teaching English as an international

language. Achieving this in the Japanese EFL context requires innovative approaches and creative utilization of available resources. We feel that our program provides some key implications toward developing a CLT curriculum that is a good fit with Japanese EFL culture and furthering the concept of teaching English as an international language.

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APPENDIX

Table 1 : Differences between Talking with Japanese Students and Talking with Foreign Students

1	Importance of grammar knowledge	38	We cannot make ourselves understood using "Japanese English."	29
			We could not come up with necessary words.	5
			It was difficult to continue conversation without using Japanese.	3
			Importance of grammatical knowledge	1
2	Importance of good pronunciation	21	We cannot make ourselves understood because of our accents.	20
			Importance of good and smooth pronunciation	1
3	Importance of gesture & body language	21	Importance of gestures & body language	18
			Importance of eye contact	3
4	Proficiency of foreign students	16	Their pronunciation was better than ours.	6
			They spoke so quickly we could not understand.	4
			They corrected our pronunciation.	3
			Their English is better than ours.	3
5	Importance of appropriate expressions and visual aids	13	Importance of supplementary explanation	3
			Importance of improvisation to make ourselves understood	3
			Importance of visual aids	3
			Importance of good examples	2
			Importance of choosing easy words	2
6	Eagerness to speak English	12	I was eager to speak English, and use English words to continue conversation.	7
			I found that I could speak English and became confident.	2
			I was happy to know that I could make myself understood.	3
7	Cooperativeness of foreign students	12	They were willing to listen to our presentations	6
			They asked a lot of questions until they understood (sometimes unexpected questions).	6

8	Anxiety to speak English	7	I was nervous to speak English.	7
9	Multi-cultural point of view	1	I became more interested in different cultures and want to talk with people from different backgrounds.	1
Total				141

Table 2 : Differences between Casual Conversations and Making Presentations

1	Relief and self-confidence	32	Preparations lowered anxiety and gave me self-confidence.	30
			I could anticipate questions.	2
2	One-sided conversation, Restricted to prepared topics	14	The conversation tends to be one-sided by making presentations.	10
			Casual conversation would be better for building friendly relationships.	3
			The conversation might be limited to the topic of the presentation.	1
3	Building up vocabulary and sentence structure necessary for presentations	11	I could build up vocabulary and sentence structure necessary for presentations beforehand.	11
4	Presentations with content	11	I could make a presentation with meaningful content.	6
			The conversation extended in accordance with the listeners' interests.	4
			We could talk about each other's cultural matters objectively.	1
5	More detailed information and vocabulary was necessary	8	They ask more specific questions than in casual conversation so we need to prepare more detailed information.	4
			They asked us something we never expected, which made us embarrassed.	2
			More vocabulary is necessary to give satisfactory explanations and answers to questions.	2
Total				76

Table 3 : Differences between Talking to Western People and Talking to Asian People

1	A sense of affinity	19	I felt a sense of kinship as a fellow Asian.	7
			I felt less strain because they had the same appearance as us.	4
			It is easier to understand each other because we have many things in common.	3
			I felt relaxed because we were all non-natives.	2
			I was encouraged since we are all learners of English.	3
2	They speak slowly, easy to catch.	16	They speak slowly enough for us to understand.	16
3	Heavy accent	13	They had a heavy accent which sometimes made it difficult to understand.	13
4	Avoid using difficult words	9	They are as non-native as we are so they sometimes didn't seem to understand what we said.	5
			I had to avoid using difficult words to make myself understood.	4
5	Asian character	3	They do not use as much body language as western people.	2
			They do not have as many opinions as western people.	1
Total				60

Table 4 : Differences between Talking to Foreign Students and talking to Foreign Teachers

1	Sense of affinity	33	I felt less nervous and more relaxed.	17
			I felt more sense of affinity because we are around the same age and in the same position as students.	12
			Because we are about the same age and have many interests in common, it was easy to extend conversations and talking was fun.	4
2	Good listeners	12	Sometimes I am passive in front of teachers, but I was active in front of foreign students.	7
			Foreign students are eager to listen to us and keep on asking questions until they understand, so I was more motivated to be a good speaker of English.	3
			Foreign students expect more from us than teachers do.	2
3	More difficult to make them understood	8	It is easier to make ourselves understood to teachers than to foreign students.	8
4	Error correction and vocabulary	7	Teachers correct my mistakes, which is necessary to improve my English.	3
			Teachers correct my mistakes, so I feel more nervous in front of them.	3
			Teachers naturally have better vocabulary.	1
5	No difference concerning anxiety	6	There are no difference between students and teachers concerning anxiety.	6
Total				66

