

Article Title

Teaching English in Japan to Chinese Students

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Bio Data

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Introduction

The Changing Classroom: A More International Feel

Go to any EFL classroom in the United States or England, and it is clear that people from all over the world are studying English. All these students, however, come from various backgrounds, have different mother tongues, and can be generally said to have different struggles in acquiring English. For many years, the mixing of non-native speakers from various parts of the world into one EFL classroom occurred only in English-speaking nations, or in a few isolated cases within non-English speaking nations. The trend in Japan in recent years, however, has been towards a more mixed EFL classroom. This trend has both plusses and minuses, but it has become important for many teachers, at least at the university level, to realize that they can no longer teach to one population.

Looking back even just 10 or 20 years, Japan was essentially closed to foreign students at the undergraduate level. The fact is that up until recently the Japanese university EFL classroom was filled with Japanese-born English learners sharing basically the same language and culture. For the English teacher, this situation is perhaps not ideal in terms of

having an interesting and stimulating diverse classroom, but it does make the job easier. Problems with particular areas of English can be addressed to the entire class as a group. If one student has problems with L/R differentiation, most other students probably will benefit from further practice too. The universality and uniformity of junior high school and high school English education in Japan intensifies this. Students from Hokkaido all the way down to Okinawa generally study the same English. This has led to Japanese university students all clustering around the mean in English ability. To put it in statistical terms, the mean and median show little variation. Another point to consider is that the culture also is communal; Questions about sushi and sumo can be answered by all.

This homogeneous classroom is gradually changing. Many international students are entering the Japanese undergraduate system. For example, in 1999 alone, the total number of international students entering Japan (not just including university students) increased 8.7 percent over the previous year.(1) Nonetheless, this was not just a one-year phenomenon. The years 2000 to 2002 (the latest available data) registered double-digit growth in the number of international students. In 2001, the total increased by 23.1 percent and in 2002 by 21.2 percent.(2) These are amazing figures, but what is more startling is that the greatest growth has been seen in special colleges (senmon gakko), junior colleges, and colleges/universities, with the number in graduate schools showing only modest increases. While these students come from countries as diverse as Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, and Vietnam, the vast majority of students are arriving from mainland China. Looking at data from 2002, now 61.3 percent of all international students come from mainland China. Chinese students accounted for 87 percent of the overall rise in international students for 2002.(3)

The reasons for the increased internationalization of the EFL classroom at Japanese universities are simple. It goes beyond Japan's desire for internationalization, since it is also a case of economic supply and demand. As China's economy grows, the need for educated, white-collar workers increases. Although new universities are opening in China, the country still does not at the moment have enough universities to meet this demand for higher education. Therefore, many Chinese students are, in increasing numbers, selecting

Japan for their undergraduate studies. Japan, on the other hand, has traditionally been ambivalent about accepting Chinese international students. Japan's universities, while claiming to want more international students, never really meant for an increase in the number of Chinese students, since the Chinese percentage of the international student total has always been high.

What most dramatically made an increase in the number of Chinese students possible was Japan's flagging economy. With a decreasing population and predictions of even further reductions in the number of Japanese applicants to universities, China has become the oxygen for many struggling, and even some not-so-struggling universities. According to the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper (Japanese version), the number of Japanese eighteen-year-olds decreased from a peak of 2.05 million in 1992 to 1.5 million in 2002, a 26 percent drop. It is estimated that by the year 2009, the number of eighteen-year-olds will have declined 20 percent from the 2002 level.(4)

There are now some universities, especially in outlying areas, which have foreign student populations over fifty percent. This increase has been accompanied by a gradual relaxation in entry regulations at immigration control. Newly established universities and departments also have a "30% Rule" to abide by.(5) This rule stipulates that the universities should include nontraditional students and international students as thirty percent of their student body. The government and universities, working in tandem, have come to see Chinese students as their "golden egg." Not only are universities becoming increasingly active in recruiting Chinese students, they are also laying the groundwork for ensuring a continued flow of students. Some universities now offer their entrance exams in China, and some have also set up intensive Japanese-language courses within China.

Micro-Research into Teaching English in Japan to Chinese Students

The success of having these Chinese students in a Japanese EFL classroom has not been closely monitored. The following is a compilation of three short case studies-action study if you will-of teaching EFL to Chinese students in Japan.

The university in this case is a small private university in a small urban area in northern Kyoto prefecture. Like many rural universities, it faces a declining number of Japanese applicants as well as lack of prestige to ensure its future. At this point in time, it has staked its survival on being able to recruit a large number of Chinese students (and in the future also a large number of Korean students). It is reasonable to assume that if the university meets its goals, someday approximately one-third of the graduating class will be Chinese, one-third Korean, and one-third Japanese. It will truly be an international Asian university. The classes involved in this case study are first-year English (Chinese students only), first-year English (mixed class of Chinese and Japanese students), and third-year English (again mixed).

The first-year mandatory English class, comprised of only Chinese students, in some ways serves as a control group. The absence of Japanese students means that the teacher can direct his or her attention to one group with specific English problems, and can also consider to some extent that the students have a shared culture. If a student encountered a problem with English, the whole class usually shared the same problem. Overall, a kind of "Chinglish" was evident. Also, the shared experiences went beyond just problems with English, and even beyond mere shared knowledge of their homeland. The class was, after all, born and acculturated in China. The famed Confucian ethic and Chinese ambition, both stereotypical but relatively true images of the Chinese people, affected the classroom structure. Extra competition was added with the knowledge that students who receive good grades in all their courses were eligible for scholarships.

Nonetheless, the 20 students in this class were active and friendly. As is borne out in other studies, they were more interested in English than their typical Japanese counterparts would be.(6) Chinese students place a greater emphasis on learning. They have an outward respect for teachers; It takes some time to get them to stop addressing teachers as "sir". They also tend to be more responsive than Japanese students. Perhaps it was because we were all foreigners in Japan, but they also enjoyed sharing their culture with me. This all made it, for the teacher, a very interesting class.

There were, however, some problems, not all of which were culture-related. The greatest difficulty came in managing a class which in actuality was composed of many different levels, from beginner to upper-intermediate. This gap can be attributed to, what I learned later, is China's problem in making English education uniform and universal. Six years of English in good schools in Beijing or Shanghai prepare a student much better than six years' worth in some rural village. While great strides have been made, education is as of yet uneven in China. In my particular classroom, three lower-level students had to eventually be partially segregated from the rest of the class, as they were unable to keep up and had to be given more basic English tasks. The textbook, too, proved a problem because it had abundant explanations in Japanese. Produced for a Japanese audience, the text also keyed in on Japanese students' English-language problem areas. Furthermore, some of the conversation topics, such as dating, which produce interesting classes in Japan, created a lot of embarrassment for these Chinese students who were obviously not used to talking about such things.

Since all students in the university, Japanese or Chinese, use the same textbook, it would have proven difficult to select a different book. In actuality, the text turned out to be acceptable, with adaptation by the teacher. Key explanations written in Japanese were used as our Japanese language practice time. As another example, pronunciation practice was altered. The Chinese students' difficulties were stressed; R/L differentiation was skimmed, but S/TH pronunciation required double practice. The variety of vowel sounds in the English language, usually not too difficult for Japanese students, was actually quite troublesome for this class. With communication-centered English in China not yet at the level it is in Japan, it became clear that many students were for the first time hearing native speakers' English and were for the first time conversing rather than translating. From this perspective, the Japanese government's increasing emphasis on conversational English at the secondary school level appears to have paid off, although the effort to get the "Communicative Approach" into the curriculum has often been halfhearted.(7)

Another problem with the Chinese students' class was that grammar also was different from Japanese students'. Articles, prepositions, word order, and subject-verb agreement all

prove difficult for Japanese students, but seemed even more so for these Chinese students. Clearly, the problems are evident because the students are employing Chinese grammar, having an over-reliance on translation. Nonetheless, as is mentioned in an article on the TESOL website concerning China, it is a tradeoff in teaching Chinese students. The students "often have learned bad habits" which "can be difficult to correct and improve. Nevertheless, teaching English is usually a positive experience because the students really do want to learn."(8)

The first-year class including an equal mix of both Japanese and Chinese students also went well, but many of the dynamics of the classroom changed. Essentially using the same materials, it now became a balancing act between the needs of the Chinese students and the needs of the Japanese students. Teachers with experience in EFL classes in English-speaking countries can most probably attest to these added difficulties. The Japanese students' passive attitudes also seemed to have an effect on the Chinese students, as active participation decreased. Even though cooperation and consideration were the norm, true mixing also occurred less than would be desired, as Chinese students usually sat on one side of the room and Japanese students on the other. The partial integration of the classroom did, however, have some good results. The Chinese students in this class interacted outside of class with their Japanese counterparts much more than did the all-Chinese class. They had more opportunities to speak Japanese and blend in to the university. Nonetheless, as an EFL approach, it was not without its demerits.

The third-year mixed class also serves as a test case. As an elective course, it was selected by students who were supposedly interested in English. The class was composed of five eager Chinese students, five hardworking Japanese students, and another five or so Japanese students who came when they wanted and for the most part failed the class. The dynamics here were again slightly different. The number of enthusiastic students outnumbered morose ones, and these pupils were able to tackle important world issues and greatly improve their English. The positive attitudes of the Chinese learners, who understood the utility of English as an international language and as a way of finding a good job, kept the class on a fast pace. Being an elective course, the Chinese students who

are poor at English did not choose to register. The Japanese students who were unmotivated either did not sign up for the class or did not bother to attend regularly. This third-year class shows that a mixed class can turn out to be a success, but also that certain conditions allowed this class to flourish.

Summary and Discussion

Further research needs to be conducted, ideally at different universities and with teachers of different perspectives, in order to arrive at more definite findings, but there are numerous implications to be had from the research conducted here. First is that the EFL world is becoming more interconnected. This requires more cooperation and better information flow. Cross-national contacts at seminars and conferences are likely to become more crucial. Information over the web or through books and magazines will play a bigger role. The EFL community in China, having a shorter history, is not as organized as in Japan, but there are numerous web sites which helped me as I was preparing to teach my Chinese students. Dave Sperling's site (www.eslcafe.com) provided me with useful information through the chat and forums sections. TESOL's site (www.tesol.org/index.htm) gave concrete examples of English teachers' experiences with students in China. A China-based site (teflchina.com or teflchina.org) provided key hints on how to approach the teaching of Chinese students.

Books on English teaching in China are available also, but most have to be special-ordered from overseas. Likewise, many language teaching journals supply good information, but getting these back issues can be time-consuming. In the end, the best way to find out about the students' difficulties is through direct questioning and first-hand experience with the students themselves. Another implication derived from these experiences is that no longer can university teachers assume that students coming to class have been blessed with roughly the same educational (and cultural) experiences. One way to partially solve this problem is through beforehand level checks and grouping according to aptitude scores. If Japanese universities are unwilling to conduct such checks, then the teacher must learn to cope with the situation at least until Chinese English education becomes more universal.

Cultural differences too, according to the lessons drawn from these three case studies, play a role in various aspects of the classroom. While Chinese and Japanese students are the sum of their experiences, and while certainly individual differences are important, some knowledge of the students' culture is definitely necessary. For a first-time teacher in Japan, it is important to know that Japanese people tend to be shy, unassertive, and afraid of making mistakes. An EFL teacher at the University of Hawaii (personal conversation; name unknown) remarked that in her experience Japanese students were her worst pupils because of their tendency towards passivity. Not knowing that Japanese students are relatively passive could cause a teacher to misinterpret classroom signs, especially if the teacher were from a culture that believes in a highly participatory classroom.

A teacher should also realize that Chinese students come from a Confucian society, where learning is valued and teachers tend to be respected. A person's attitude, personality, motivation, values, relationships, and beliefs are all culture-related. This can be borne out in numerous studies of political and social culture (e.g., Samuel Huntington's works). Certainly culture can not be ignored in the classroom. For example, it could be important to know that Chinese students are highly patriotic while their Japanese counterparts rarely ever exhibit such feelings.

Authors such as Mr. Peter Dash state that countries like China are becoming more globally conscious, and thus students from transition nations like China have less a stereotypical Chinese culture than a global youth culture. Certainly this trend towards globalization is also important, and youth in many countries are similar, but the fact remains that culture is still fundamental. Over the long term, culture as a factor in the classroom may possibly fade, but at the moment the differences between cultures are too great to ignore. While a teacher should not "elevate a cultural factor to too great a significant weighting," the case studies involved herein point to culture, along with differences in language difficulties, as key factors that must be accepted by the teacher.(9)

Another implication-or rather a concern-from these case studies is whether to separate classes according to students' nationality, or create a mixed class. In the above cases, both

approaches worked, but led to contrasting environments and required different approaches by the teacher. Merely in terms of addressing the needs of the students, it might be better to have a mono-cultural classroom, but this also does serve to keep the two groups from interacting.

It is clear, from both this study and in other reports, that Japanese university education will be changing greatly over the next 20 or 30 years. One trend is the increased internationalization of Japanese universities. This also means an increased internationalization in the EFL classrooms here. Reverberations will be felt throughout the EFL industry, from textbook publishers to teachers. As with any change, the challenges will be greater, but the opportunities will also be more wonderful.

ENDNOTES

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