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Issues in Learning English as a Foreign Language for First-Year Japanese University Students

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2018 International Meeting and Cruise

- The 2018 International Meeting on Quality of Life was held recently. Proceedings as well as photos and other information from past conferences can be found at <http://as4qol.org/icqol/2018/>

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Issues in Learning English as a Foreign Language for First-Year Japanese University Students

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Abstract

Purpose: Learning English has always been a challenge for English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students. In the present study, issues of interest/concern were examined in two first-year classes in a Japanese university. **Methods:** Students (n=54) following a mandatory regular English coursework to enhance their communication ability were asked to answer a questionnaire. Briefing of questions and multiple responses for each item were explained before the completed questionnaire were submitted. **Results:** Students (90.8%) using the same textbook found the lecture useful and interesting. The textbook contents were global in perspective and extensive in knowledge: 99.2% thought the contents were informative, useful, and interesting. Of post-lecture assignments given, students (48.1%) enjoyed most in making stories using vocabulary learned, followed by giving oral presentations (35.2%), and answering questions after video-watching (24.1%). Students found expressing their thoughts orally (74.1%) and in sentences (50.0%) the most challenging, while grammar, vocabulary, and spelling were less of an issue. Students harbored a positive learning attitude, and wanted to study harder to improve English ability (70.4%). **Discussion:** Students enjoyed the lectures, and found the lectures useful, interesting, and informative. They experienced difficulties in expressing their thoughts orally and in writing in English. This could be the main issue affecting EFL students not only in Japan but also in other global regions, where the mother-tongue is not English. It is therefore of urgent task to re-examine the educational system and teaching approaches at secondary level to mold and activate students in overcoming said issues for post-secondary graduates to participate in global communication.

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Keywords: English learning, book contents, assignments and issues in ESL learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning English has always been a challenge for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The task is especially difficult for Japanese students enrolled in the present study, where they were supposed to have undergone 6 (junior high school: 3; senior high school: 3) years or more of EFL learning before entering university. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (MEXT) has increasingly put more emphasis on English education at all stages of formal and full-fledged English language education programs from junior high school to university in the hope of developing communicative abilities through English language.¹ Moreover, the government has recently announced that in 2020 Japan will implement changes whereby starting with the fifth grade English will become a mandatory regular subject area, as opposed to the current “foreign language activity” system whereby children are expected to learn English through fun programs such as playing games or singing songs.² In conjunction with this, foreign language activities are to be newly introduced from the third year of elementary school, based on the current ESL curricula was revised in 2017.³ In the present study, we tried to investigate the issues of interest/concern encountered by the first-year students in a Japanese university.

2. METHODS

A total of 54 students (male: 35; female: 19) from first-year classes (A: n=24; B: n=30) in University A, following a mandatory regular English curriculum to enhance their communication ability during the first of 2 semesters per academic year, were subjects of the study. Students were categorized into classes according to their English ability based on Test of English for International Communication/Computerized Assessment System for English Communication (TOEIC/CASEC) scores (>420-725; Class A generally had lower scores: >420 vs >470). To ensure learning tools were homogeneous, all students cooperated using the same textbook. On the last day of First Semester, students were asked to answer a questionnaire. Briefing of questions and multiple responses for each item were explained to the students after the questionnaire was distributed, and the questionnaire with answers (without names) were submitted at the end of the lecture.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Perception of the lecture by subjects (year-1 university students) enrolled in the study

Most of the students (90.8%) found the lecture useful or interesting (Table 1), while others perceived the lecture as boring (16.7%) and not useful (5.6%). The textbook was accepted as appropriate by 76.0%, while 20.4% and 3.0% found it too easy and too difficult, respectively (data not shown).

3.2 Perception of textbook contents by subjects

The textbook used had a global in perspective, and the areas covered were various and included an extensive array of topics. On the questionnaires, 99.2% thought the contents were informative (38.9%), useful (40.7%), and/or interesting (29.6%), although some (11.1% (boring), 1.0% (not useful), and 5.6% (waste of time)) perceived otherwise (Table 2).

Table 1: Perception of the academic English lectures (Spring, 2018) Perceptions of First-year students (n=54) of either gender in Classes A (n=24) and B (n=30) in the First Semester 2018 in A Japanese university. (Cumulative % includes multiple answers)

| | Class A | Class B | A+B (n=54) | Cumulative % |
|----------------|---------|---------|------------|--------------|
| 1) Interesting | 8 | 11 | 19 (35.2%) | |
| 2) Useful | 9 | 21 | 30 (55.6%) | 90.8 |
| 3) Boring | 5 | 4 | 9 (16.7%) | |
| 4) Not useful | 3 | 0 | 3 (5.6%) | 22.3 |

Table 2: Perception of textbook contents. (Cumulative % includes multiple answers)

| | Class A | Class B | A+B (n=54) | Cumulative % |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|------------|--------------|
| 1) Informative | 9 | 12 | 21 (38.9%) | |
| 2) Useful | 6 | 16 | 22 (40.7%) | |
| 3) Interesting | 6 | 10 | 16 (29.6%) | 99.2 |
| 4) Boring | 4 | 2 | 6 (11.1%) | |
| 5) Not useful | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.9%) | |
| 6) Waste of time | 3 | 0 | 3 (5.6%) | 18.6 |

3.3 Post-lecture assignments

Assignments given after each lecture were challenging and required time to prepare before submission or presentation (Table 3). Almost half of students (48.1%) enjoyed most in making stories after lecture using vocabulary learned, followed in preference by giving oral presentations (35.2%), answering questions after video-watching (24.1%); although lower in count, some participated actively in Q&A after reviewing a certain topic (7.4%). They also enjoyed passive learning (listening to lectures: 11.1%), particularly Class A.

3.4 Difficulties encountered by ESL students

Based on these assignments (Table 4), students found expressing their thoughts orally (74.1%) and in sentences (50.0%) the most challenging, while grammar (9.3%), vocabulary (3.7%), and spelling (1.9%) seemed manageable. Many of the students found the lecturer cooperative (24.1%), interesting/intriguing (48.1%), or understanding/kind (31.5%), although 14.8% found the lecturer unkind (data not shown). Of these, 24.1% would like to follow other lectures by said lecturer. Overall, students were harbored a positive learning attitude by studying harder to improve English ability (70.4%).

4. DISCUSSION

Both low- and high-level EFL Japanese learners at school face certain language barriers, especially in oral and written work (also shown in the present study; Table 4), albeit they can perform well in reading and listening: viz., possibly because both speaking and writing involve active and comprehensive use of English in communication.¹ A test carried out to measure the four major skills (i.e., reading, listening, speaking, and writing) at 480 randomized high schools in Japan reveals that third-year high school students' English skills (especially in speaking and writing) are far from government-targeted ability levels.² Probably Japanese education has generally placed undue emphasis on scores in passing tests and examinations.⁴

The students in our study appeared to understand that the academic lectures were useful and they harbored interest in learning ESL via these lectures, although some thought otherwise (Table 1). The un-

Table 3: The most useful exercise given after lecture. (Cumulative % includes multiple answers)

| | Class A | Class B | A+B (n=54) | Cumulative % |
|--|---------|---------|------------|--------------|
| 1) Using vocabulary to make stories | 13 | 13 | 26 (48.1%) | |
| 2) Answering questions after video-watching | 5 | 8 | 13 (24.1%) | |
| 3) Giving oral presentations | 8 | 11 | 19 (35.2%) | |
| 4) Asking/Answering questions with each other | 2 | 2 | 4 (7.4%) | 114.4% |
| 5) Listening quietly to lectures delivered | 6 | 0 | 6 (11.1%) | 11.1% |

Table 4: The most difficult part of speech. (Cumulative % includes multiple answers)

| | Class A | Class B | A+B (n=54) | Cumulative % |
|--|---------|---------|------------|--------------|
| 1) Vocabulary | 1 | 1 | 2 (3.7%) | |
| 2) Spelling | 0 | 1 | 1 (1.9%) | |
| 3) Expressing thoughts in sentences | 11 | 16 | 27 (50.0%) | |
| 4) Expressing thoughts orally | 17 | 23 | 40 (74.1%) | 124.1% |
| 5) Grammar | 2 | 3 | 5 (9.3%) | 9.3% |

favorable finding on usefulness was especially marked in the less-able students (Class A; Table 1). This could have been due to a feeling that the subject was difficult or demotivating factors like boredom and uselessness, possibly leading to them want to 'give-up', experienced by the same 3 students (Class A; Table 2). Concerning boredom, those in Class A consistently showed higher counts/percentages (Tables 1, 2). As they all used the same textbook, the less-able (based on TOEIC scores) were more likely to not cope well in spirits and basics with the book (as shown in responses from Class A). Learning can be enjoyable and intriguing for those who can cope with it and are motivated; however, the reverse is probably felt by those unable to cope with the teaching materials even with the proper tools. It is therefore essential to achieve uniform learning results with students having equivalent abilities. In cases where less-able students are in the class, appropriate motivational support^{5,6} may be necessary to help them cope well with learning/lectures.

Additionally, students found the contents of the textbook enjoyable (Table 2): responses indicated that the contents were useful, informative, and interesting, although some found them boring, waste of time, and boring (with more counts from Class A). This is probably because the less-able students were less motivated^{5,6} to learn certain aspects of the contents even if they had coped well and tried harder. The feeling of wanting to 'give-up' followed with the inability to cope were obvious (compared to able students) with the less-able students, especially from Class A.

In post-lecture assignments, it is indeed encouraging to note that a majority of students' responses (Table 3) were geared towards active- and deep-learning.⁷ However, there remained a certain number (11.1% from Class A) who preferred the traditional unilateral approach of spoon-fed learning: sitting quietly listening to lectures. In fact, passive learning was especially typical of students from Class A. Because of the lack of confidence and ability coupled with inadequate basics, students in Class A preferred the traditional unilateral approach of passive learning. However, if these students had put in enough effort and plucked up their courage to challenge themselves to participate in the active learning exercises, they might have responded more favorably and affirmatively to the questions in Tables 1-3.

Although overwhelmingly favorable responses were given by most of the students concerning the post-lecture challenges, a high cumulative count (124.1%) still found expressing their thoughts in written and oral forms difficult (Table 4). Low responses on grammar, vocabulary, and spelling are probably attributable to the thorough emphasis Japanese English education places on these perspectives in secondary education, where persistent tests/quizzes on these perspectives are consistently used in class promotion, university/company entrance examinations.⁴ In addition, Japanese secondary education lack various vocabularies and expression styles involved in describing thoughts and events in various situations. As a result, many Japanese students entering university are unprepared for active- and in-depth learning:⁷ viz., they have difficulty expressing their thoughts orally and in writing events in English. Indeed, the educational systems and needs for preparing students for communication when they are in secondary schools require a thorough and deep analysis⁸ to provide a practical approach for current ESL learning.

In the case of the present students, a useful and effective approach would have been to involve the students in active- and deep-learning.⁷ Students should be given the topic to learn per se, while instructors guide the students in whenever they face inadequacy or difficulty in expressing their thoughts in communication either orally or in written form.

The handicap experienced by students in this study is highly attributable to their inadequate and lopsided secondary education, which emphasizes passing examinations. Testing students in comprehension

and grammar alone is not enough to prepared students in ESL, they should be given opportunities to debate, write compositions, and do reports which preparare them to assess, analyze, formulate and conceptualize their thoughts in literary English and other ESP (English for Special Purpose) such as science English.⁹ It is indisputable that the basics are essential for language learning; however, application should then follow once the basics are in place. In other words, based on the educational system of these Japanese students then, grammar should be in place for the first 3 years in secondary education, followed by application plus (unfinished basic or complementary) grammar in the later 3 secondary years. With the introduction of English in primary education, all grammar basics should be completed by grade 6, with application and remaining unfinished/complementary grammar in first 3 secondary years. Higher application and communication in English should then be implemented in the latter 3 secondary years before students enter university or graduate after high school. Alternately, one could use a system where basic topics and applications are incorporated as students advance to higher learning levels; this is an effective system which is practiced and followed in non-native English-speaking countries such as Singapore, India, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, and where post-secondary graduates are mostly able to communicate adequately in English.

The problems affecting Japanese ESL learners could be similarly affecting their ESL-learning peers in other regions of the world whose mother-tongue is not English. However, the above-mentioned educational system successfully used in certain non-native English-speaking countries should serve as a useful and practical model for effective and efficient ESL learning in all non-English speaking countries, such as in Asia (e.g. Japan, China, Taiwan, Indonesia and Thailand, etc.), Latin America (Columbia, Peru, etc., and Africa (Tunisia, Algeria, etc.). It is therefore of urgency to examine these educational systems and teaching approaches to mold and activate students in overcoming aforementioned issues for them to participate in global communication.

4.1 Limitations of study

In this study, study-samples were limited to two classes in one university's curriculum. In future studies, the number of samples needs to be enhanced, as well as the variety of students' majors, even though certain suggestions and tendencies as to issues encountered by ESL learners were established in this study. In addition, the criteria for class categorization based on TOEIC/CASEC scores may not be appropriate. Therefore, the results in this study merely reflect certain categorized students in a certain university, and do reflect the universal issues encountered by other Japanese ESL learners. In fact, the results showed that students were in fact high-performers, as they thought grammar, spelling and vocabulary were less of an issue. Issues faced by lower-performing studens may not be analogous to those reported in this study. It would be more practical or ideal if more comprehensive criteria including communication ability was incorporated in class categorization. For further study in the future, these aspects need to be explored and improved.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Students armed with the proper basics in English enjoyed and found the academic English lectures useful, interesting, and informative. They found post-lecture assignments involving active- and deep-learning challenging, and experienced difficulties in expressing their thoughts orally and in writing in English. This could be attributable to the issues originating in the secondary educational system; this situation affects EFL students not only in Japan but also in other regions of the world whose mother-tongue is not English. It is therefore urgent to re-examine the educational system and teaching approaches to mold and activate students in overcoming said issues to participate in global communication.

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