

Creating Role models for Japanese Learners

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Abstract

English classes in Japan are often taught through the medium of Japanese. This sends the message that English is a subject of study rather than a means of communication. A great deal of recent research and pedagogical work has gone into encouraging more classroom English use by Japanese Teachers of English in order to provide positive role models of language use to students. Along with this, other content area faculty members can become role models for students' English success. Results of this study indicate that viewing videos of non-English specialist faculty members using English has a strongly positive effect on students' motivation, confidence and sense of connection to English.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers are role models for their students. They may be positive role models or negative role models, but there is no escaping the fact that they are role models. In many ways, choices teachers make about how they teach can leave as lasting an impression as the content of the lesson itself. In Japanese English classes, the teachers' language use in class has an important impact on students' attitudes towards English and their language learning. Showcasing confident L2 use by Japanese teachers can provide students with a positive role model and an achievable goal.

1.1 English Instruction in Japan

In Japan, there seems to be a general belief that English is difficult and that Japanese people cannot learn English well. In the eyes of many students in Japan, English is not something for Japanese people; it is something that is either American or British (Bayne, Usui and Watanabe, 2002). Learners often seem to see themselves as monolingual. The sentiment "We are Japanese so we don't speak English" is common among the Japanese EFL students (Hadley, Jeffrey and Warwick, 2002) and many students come into university English classes already lacking motivation to learn English (Koizumi & Matsuo, 1993). This is especially true in rural areas where the students do not see English as a relevant part of their futures (Miyazato, 2001). While these perceptions are likely connected to the wider Japanese culture, it is reasonable to assume that the way English is taught in Japan has a strong influence on how it is perceived.

Despite recent Ministry of Education Science and Technology policy statements to the contrary (MEXT, 2003), in English classes in Japanese schools the medium of instruction is predominately Japanese (Gorsuch, 2001). Mahoney (2004) found that few Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) define their role in the classroom in terms of providing a model of language use. Reasons for this include: the perceived need for Japanese medium instruction due to the high school and university entrance examination system (Guest, 2000), the strong and long standing tradition of grammar –translation based teaching (Sakui, 2004), concerns about the students' ability to cope with English medium instruction (Murphey & Purcell, 2000), and the teachers' own language anxiety (Komiya-Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004) and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, 1996). Another important factor is the strong native speaker focus found in Japanese language education. JTEs tend to see the native speaker as the only possible model for success, and their own English proficiency is often underrated or dismissed. They do not believe that they can be an appropriate model of language use for their students without being native-speaker perfect (Honna & Takeshita, 1998).

1.2 Influence on Students

Murphey (2000) has argued, following media theorist Marshal McLuhan, that in language teaching the medium is the message. He says that the fact that English classes are conducted in Japanese sends the message “that English is an object of study, not something to be used” (p. 3). If even their English teachers do not speak English, how will the average student be able to imagine themselves doing so? In this case, a language teacher who does not use the target language as the medium of instruction is acting as a negative role model.

On the other hand, as a non-native speaker, a JTE who confidently and proficiently used English in class could send a tremendous positive message to their students and influence how they perceived both English and the process of language learning in general. In arguing for a shift away from a native speaker model of proficiency, Cook (2000) suggests that learners need to see their nonnative teachers speaking the target language, precisely because they are proficient without being native-speaker perfect. They need to see an achievable goal, i.e., “someone who has arrived where the students want to be, not someone who happens to have been born there” (p.330). If they see a non-native speaker from their own community working confidently and effectively in English, they will have a chance to develop a positive language identity in English (McKay, 2002). This idea is beginning to take

hold in Japan. There is more and more acknowledgement of the role of Japanese teachers of English as models not only of the language itself, but also of positive language identity (Miyazato, 2007). But there seems to be a lot of work yet to be done.

1.3 Promoting English Use in Japanese Schools

Various researchers have proposed methods for increasing the amount of English used by JTEs in class. Welker (1996) encourages small steps in building up English use for classroom management and instruction. He advocates using English initially in limited and controlled ways in the classroom and gradually adding functions and content areas to one's English repertoire. Heywood (2008) conducted live, in-class interviews in which ALTs and JTEs discussed topics chosen by students. He found improvements in motivation among the students and surprise that their English teacher could actually speak English.

Murphey (2000) edited an entire volume of case studies looking at how JTEs increased the amount of English they used in class and how their students responded to it. Along with steps individual JTE's can take, he advocates large scale changes in how the English curriculum is structured and in the university entrances examination system.

These studies all focus on increasing the amount of English used by JTEs in class. However other faculty members in the school have the potential to be role models for students' language learning as well. It may be good for language learners to have role models who have not dedicated their education to English but who none the less use English as part of their professional and private lives.

In earlier research on this topic Brown (2008) interviewed non-language specialists in English on topics taken from the Global issues curriculum of an undergraduate English Communication course and used the interviews as teaching materials. It was hypothesized that seeing not only Japanese L1 speakers, but Japanese L1 speakers who were not specialist English teachers, using English effectively would be motivational for students. Anecdotal observations and post course interviews with students showed a greater sense of connection to the community of English speakers and a new sense of ownership of English, along with increased motivation and self reported gains in proficiency. A great deal of surprise was also observed. Until seeing the faculty interviews, the students had never considered that idea that their content professors could speak English. There seemed to be a common assumption among Japanese people that only JTEs and other specialists speak English.

2. THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study continues and expands on the earlier work discussed above. Japanese faculty members from other departments (i.e. not specialist English teachers) were interviewed on video. Since the study was conducted on a relatively small campus, the faculty members were all known to the students. They were asked to discuss their views on a variety of topics from a global issues curriculum used in a mixed second, third and fourth year English communication program. Topics included environmental problems, changes in Japan's immigration policies and economic globalization among others. The interviews were edited together to show the sometimes similar and sometimes opposing views that often come out in discussing controversial issues. DVD collections of the interviews formed the basis of the listening comprehension component of the course.

3. RESULTS

Data was collected from a total of 28 students in surveys conducted before students began the course and after completion of the one semester course using faculty interview DVDs. Both closed (Likert-scale) and open ended items were included in the surveys.

Table 1: Student responses to selected statements before and after viewing faculty interview DVDs.

Likert Scale Statements (1= Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly agree)	Average	
	Pre	Post
1. Japanese people are good at learning English.	2.4	2.9
2. I am good at learning English.	2.3	2.8
3. Japanese people can be bilingual.	3.6	4.1
4. I can be bilingual.	2.4	3.3
5. It is important to speak English perfectly.	3.1	2.6
6. I need to speak English perfectly.	3.0	2.9
7. Making mistakes when I speak English is OK.	2.6	2.8
8. I have a clear goal for my English.	3.5	3.4
9. English is close to me.	3.3	3.5
10. I am confident speaking English.	2.1	2.3

Table 2: Student responses to open-ended questions before and after viewing faculty interview DVDs.

Who are your language learning role models?		
Rank	Pre	Post
1	None	Japanese faculty at my school
2	<i>Senpai</i> ¹	<i>Senpai</i>
3	Foreign teachers at my school	None
4	My junior high school teacher	Friend

What bilingual Japanese people do you know?		
Rank	Pre	Post
1	None	Japanese faculty at my school
2	<i>Senpai</i>	<i>Senpai</i>
3	Friend	None
4	My junior high school teacher	Friend

The students' responses to the closed and open questions in surveys conducted before and after the use of the faculty interview DVDs show some intriguing changes in the pre and post data sets. Table 1 shows clear differences in the average response (measured on a Likert scale) to all prompt statements. Of particular interest are the dramatic increases in the results related to ability to learn English (statements 1 & 2) and potential to become bilingual (statements 3 & 4). Another interesting point pertaining to bilingualism is the contrast between the students' general feeling that Japanese people can be bilingual, as expressed in item 3, and the doubt that they themselves can be bilingual, as expressed in item 4. Responses to prompts dealing with affective factors - feelings of connection to English and confidence (statements 9 & 10) showed smaller, but still notable, increases between the before and after surveys.

The responses to the open-ended prompts (shown in table 2) were also revealing. Before the studying in the course using faculty interview DVDs the most common response to the questions "Who are your language learning role models?" and "What bilingual

¹ *Senpai* is the Japanese term for senior or upperclassman. It is used as a title or form of address for those in an organization (school, club, company, etc) who are older or have more experience and seniority. The opposite term, referring to juniors, is *Kohai*.

Japanese people to you know?” was “no one”. Following the course, the most common response for both questions was “Japanese faculty at my school”. Also of note is the fact that “*Senpai*” was the second ranked response to both questions before and after the course. The position of “my junior high school teacher” at the bottom of the pre-course results for both questions is also worth noting.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of the closed ended survey items indicate a change in attitude associated with watching the faculty interview DVDs. After seeing their own teachers (who were not language specialists) confidently using English to communicate, students seem to have more positive attitudes towards English. They appear to have developed confidence and, at least for the short term, come to believe that they can effectively learn English, become bilingual and take ownership of the language. The faculty who participated in the interview project became role models for the students and may have engendered these positive attitudes.

It is also encouraging that exposure to the faculty interview DVDs seems to have changed the students image of Japanese speakers of English. Before the course, students agreed in an abstract sense that Japanese people could be bilingual but did not feel that they in particular could. This may be connected to the fact that a large number of students did not know any Japanese speakers of English whom they considered bilingual. Following the course, Japanese faculty members featured in the DVD were listed as both bilingual Japanese people the students knew and as language learning role models. At the same time, the feeling that Japanese people in general and the students themselves in particular can be bilingual increased and the gap between these two ideas decreased.

One other interesting result is the strong position of *Senpai* in the results. In the study group, *Senpai* and *Kohai* study together since the communication program is streamed by English proficiency level rather than school year. Of course, anyone working in a Japanese educational context will recognize the importance of the *Senpai-Kohai* bond among students. It is the backbone of the social hierarchy in the school (Le Tendre, 1999). The fact that these students' *Senpai* were seen as both effective bilingual speakers of English and suitable language learning role models speaks to the power of the connection. The potential for this connection to be exploited by explicitly having *Senpai* act as near peer role models has been explored by Murphey and Arao (2001), who found significant changes in students' attitudes

towards English and language learning in general after watching a video of their *Senpai* talking about their positive language learning experiences.

Another heartening note in the data was the position of “my junior high school teacher” in the results. Though ranked last in terms of number of responses in the pre-course survey and missing entirely from the post-course results, junior high school teachers were seen to some extent as both bilingual Japanese speakers and language learning role models. This leads one to conclude that the students have seen their junior high school teachers speaking English proficiently and confidently at some point. Perhaps English is being used as the medium of some instruction in some schools.

5. LIMITATIONS

Of course, ascribing the changes in attitudes seen in the results of this study solely to the faculty interview DVDs would be over-reaching and premature. One must also allow for the possibility that there were other influences from within and beyond the classroom. One in particular that warrants more attention is the role that a mixed age class and the presence of *Senpai* in the class may play in changing attitudes. Also, the size of the study group was insufficient and the term of the study was too short to make broad claims of long lasting efficacy.

Similar projects focusing on interviews with the students’ *Senpai*, JTEs and other faculty members can be conducted to confirm the results of this work. These larger scale studies should also investigate actual changes in language proficiency which may or may not be correlated with the attitude changes seen here. Longer term studies are also called for to confirm that the improvements in attitudes and confidence seen here are not transitory.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the limitations of the study, some tentative conclusions can be drawn and they are quite intriguing and suggestive for changes in practice. It seems clear that exposing students to L1 group members with whom they identify and who are using the target language confidently and proficiently can have some real benefits in how the students perceive English and their relationship to it.

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