

Success Factors in the Acquisition of English as a Second Language: Class Language and Self-Confidence

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Abstract

In order to determine their experiences and attitudes to English learning at high school a survey was carried out on undergraduates at Otaru University of Commerce, undergoing the first semester of their compulsory English study. Students were asked about various aspects of their English learning at high school, in particular about the degree of confidence they had in the ability of their Japanese English teachers to help them achieve fluency in English. The number of students expressing low confidence in their teachers represented over 50% of those surveyed. In comments justifying their position the most frequently mentioned factor was the teacher's English proficiency, and the teacher's use of Japanese in class was perceived as detrimental to their success in acquiring English. Comments suggest a demarcation of roles between native and non-native teacher, which is most obviously present in the case of the less confident students, who tend to believe in the superiority of the native teacher, placing an unwarranted stress on pronunciation. Conversely, more confident students quoted their own role or the role of the teacher as factors behind their success.

Acknowledgements

We express our gratitude to our colleagues in the English department at Otaru University of Commerce who generously allowed us to use their classes to conduct the survey. We also wish to thank all the students for their cooperation in completing the questionnaire in good faith. Finally, any errors of interpretation are our own.

1. Introduction

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology is clear about developing English communication skills during secondary education: their ‘overall objectives’ of foreign language (English) education at high school are unambiguously communicative at heart:

To develop students’ practical communication abilities such as understanding information and the speaker’s or writer’s intentions, and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages. MEXT (2003)

In spite of this, the goal of teaching English for practical purposes is not being achieved in the high school classroom. There is a considerable amount of literature on ESL teaching in Japan remarking on the fact that students do not exhibit the desired communicative skills and that the situation can be mainly attributed to the teachers’ failure to use the kinds of methods that would enhance the acquisition of such skills, see Wadden (1992), Bueno and Caesar (2003) and the references quoted therein.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the causes of this lack of success, in particular, we are interested in the demarcation of roles between native teachers (assistant English teachers - AETs) and Japanese teachers and its impact on student motivation, and ultimately achievement. Our longer term aim is to investigate the possibility that the Japanese English teacher’s lack of self-confidence determines low achievement rate in students. The research presented in this paper is the first step in addressing that question, viz how much confidence do students have in their Japanese teacher’s ability to develop their communica-

tive skills in English.

This paper describes the results of a simple survey of 383 first year students at Otaru University of Commerce, about their experiences learning English at high school. We tried to determine their attitudes to the learning process they had been through and what they felt were the successes and failures of the learning system they had been through. They were asked about the various aspects of their English learning at high school, in particular about the degree of confidence in the ability of their Japanese English teachers to help them achieve fluency in English.

2. The Questionnaire

We devised a questionnaire to be given out to all first year students during their compulsory English B (oral communication) classes. The questionnaire could be completed in approximately ten minutes at the end of the lesson (Appendix 1). There were three sections. The first comprised general questions about their high school English learning context, in particular it was important to distinguish between students who came from public schools and private schools. The second section comprised questions about the number of English classes they had per week, the kind of English classes (the class name), whether it was listening, reading, writing, grammar and so on, and the content of the classes. The aim was to confirm what proportion of their weekly English learning was involved with fluency practice (productive skills) as opposed to reading practice, translation, grammar instruction and exam preparation (receptive skills). In that section we also asked them to choose which of their classes was the most useful for their English learning, and they were given a space to explain why they chose it. The third section asked them to think about

the teacher, contrasting native speaking instructors with non-native (Japanese) instructors. Firstly, what experience they had had of being taught by an AET, and secondly, to what extent they thought they could develop English fluency studying only in the Japanese education setting.

Students

The students were in the first semester of their university study, and by and large they had only recently finished their high school education, so their experiences there were still fresh in their minds but they were no longer tied to the school, and we could expect a good degree of detached reflection on their experiences there. The majority of the student intake at OUC comes from public schools, and that was our target demographic. With the cooperation of our colleagues, the questionnaires were given out and completed by 383 students in total, the majority of whom (88.5%) were from public schools. After receiving the questionnaires all the responses were entered into a spreadsheet to facilitate a statistical analysis of the data.

3. Students' Responses

3.1. General findings

On average students had 5.7 hours of English a week, but this was slightly higher among private school students (6.4 hours). Regarding their English skills students felt most confident about English comprehension (37% of students indicated reading and 26% of students indicated translating Japanese into English) and least confident about oral communication (40% of students indicated speaking and 25% of students indicated listening). These were also the skills they placed most value in

learning, as seen in their responses to which classes were most useful and why: the most popular reason by far was 'exam preparation' (45%), followed by 'grammar improvement' and 'translation improvement' (10% each). These responses suggest that for most students the focus is on English as an entrance exam subject, not language development per se.

Native speaker teachers

Another finding of our survey is that appearances by AETs in class are very limited, so most students are unlikely ever to have had the opportunity of seeing their teacher talk with a native speaker. Many students (24%) had never had or hardly ever had (40%) an AET in their high school experience, yet MEXT requires all high schools to have visits by AETs during every school year. The problem is that the typical pattern may be for the AET to spend one or two weeks at a given school, then move on to the next school in the district, so that during a school year he/she visits every school but probably only once. If this is the case, the results show either that the AET visit had absolutely no impact on the students' memories, or that the AETs were not getting round to every class in every school.

In this paper we have decided to concentrate on the final question concerning students' confidence in their Japanese teachers of English, since it is the most relevant to our research and it also offered the most reliable and clear results.

3.2. The Confidence Scale

Students were asked to evaluate the statement in (1) on a 5 point scale ranging from 1- strong agreement to 5 strong disagreement.

(1) It is possible to become a fluent speaker of English by studying

only in Japan with a Japanese teacher.

The task was designed to probe into the students' degree of confidence in their teachers and in the Japanese school system, this being a key factor of motivation (Dörnyei et al, 2006). We will henceforth refer to the responses from the left end of the scale (1 or 2) as the high confidence group and those from the right end (4, 5) as the low confidence group. Out of 383 students, 45 did not complete this task. The answers for the remaining 338 students are presented in Figure 1.

The responses to this question reflect the students' overall low confidence in their ability to acquire English at home, and indirectly a considerable lack of confidence in the teaching system and the Japanese teachers. The number of high confidence responses is less than half the number of responses expressing low confidence. The contrast is even more obvious at the two extremes. The number for those in complete agreement with the statement (1 on the scale) is under 1%, whereas the number of those who disagree strongly (5 on the scale) is 10%.

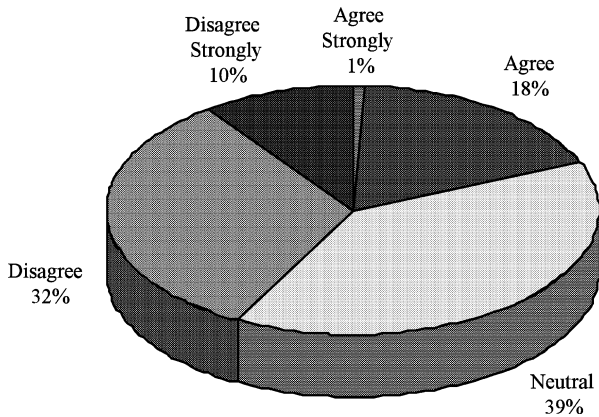


Figure 1 It is possible to become a fluent speaker of English by studying only in Japan with a Japanese teacher.

3.3. Success Factors

In addition to the numerical task, the students were asked to comment on their answers. Although there was individual variation, the majority of the comments could be classified into a limited number of themes. In this section we will first present the most frequently recurring themes and then discuss the correlation between the responses to the numerical task and the type of comment offered as a rationale for the choice.

3.3.1. Recurring Themes

The main recurring themes, in order of their frequency, were Teacher Skills, Pronunciation, Learner, Class Language, Native Dream and the System. In what follows we will briefly illustrate each theme.

Teacher Skill

A large number of comments invoked the teacher's skill as the reason behind the response to the numerical task. Over 25% of the respondents, 86 out of 314 responses, mentioned teacher skills, ranging from language proficiency to teaching technique, as illustrated in (i) and (ii) below. The number in brackets is the student's response to the numerical task.

- (i) Because I think the students' English proficiency depends on the teacher's instructional skill. (2)

生徒の英語力は教師の指導力次第だと思うから。

- (ii) I think it depends on the teacher's linguistic skills. If the teacher's pronunciation were close to native and the class were conducted entirely in English ... (3)

先生の語学力次第だと思う。ネイティブに近い発音で授業を全部英語

で行うなら。

Pronunciation

The second most frequent type of comment, 43 comments, focused on pronunciation, generally remarking the superiority of native speakers over Japanese teachers in this respect.

- (iii) I think the pronunciation of Japanese speakers is not perfect. (4)
日本人の発音では完璧ではないと思うから。

The Learner

A fairly large number of students (38) commented on the role of the learner, as illustrated in (iv).

- (iv) I think one's English improves through one's own efforts. (2)
本人の努力によって英語力が上達していくと思うから。(2)

Class Language

The next largest group of comments stressed the importance of the language used in class. There were 36 comments in this category. We can distinguish two types - those which comment on the necessity of using English in class (v) and those which deplore the excessive use of Japanese (vi).

- (v) If the teacher actively tries to speak English, maybe it is possible to become fluent. Otherwise, I do not think it is possible.
積極的に英語で話そうとする先生なら話せるようになるかもしれないが、そうでなければ話せるようにならないと思う。(3)
- (vi) A Japanese will end up speaking Japanese.
日本人は日本語を喋ってしまうから。(4)

The Native Dream

A number of comments (24) expressed the belief that a native teacher would ensure the successful acquisition of English. We have labeled this class of comments as the “Native Dream”. What distinguishes this group of comments is not the stress on the native speaker’s superior command of the language, as reflected in better pronunciation or deeper knowledge of vocabulary, or culture, but the lack of arguments or the assumption that a Japanese teacher must be inferior.

(vii) Actually, you might become fluent with a good Japanese teacher, and it might be easier to understand explanations given in Japanese. However, I still think a native speaker is ideal. (4)

本当に日本人でも上手な先生ならペラペラになれるかもしれないし、日本語の説明の法が理解しやすいとおもったから。しかしネイティブのほうが理想的だと思う。(4)

(viii) I think it is difficult to become fluent unless you make conversation with a native speaker. (4)

ネイティブと会話したりしないと流暢に話せるようになるのは難しいと思うから。(4)

(ix) Because it is not as good as speaking to a native speaker. (4)

やはりネイティブの人と話すのには劣ると思うから。(4)

This type of comment contrasts with comments that assert the superiority of the native speaker and support the position with reasonable arguments as in (x) below.

(x) I think learning from a Japanese teacher is fine because if you manage to convey your ideas and meaning it does not matter that pronunciation is not perfect. However, if you cannot keep up with the speed of authentic speech, you cannot talk, so I believe a native speaker is necessary. (3)

発音が本場のようにできなくとも、相手に意味や自分の意見が伝わればいいので、日本人の先生に習ってもいいと思う。だが、実際のスピードについていけないと話もできないので、ネイティブの人は必要だとも思ったから。(3)

The System

Finally, there were 18 comments mentioning the connection between the Japanese school system and the success (or lack thereof) in acquiring English in Japan. Most of these comments complained about the excessive importance given to grammar and translation.

(xi) In high school English (class) we are taught more grammar and translation for the exam than communication skills. (4)

高校の英語はコミュニケーション能力というよりは大学入試のために文法や和訳ばかりやっているから。(4)

3.3.2. Distribution of comments

The different types of comment are not evenly distributed among respondents. There is a correlation between the degree of confidence in the possibility of successfully acquiring English in Japan and the type of comment given in support for that position. We will present the distribution of comment types among the different confidence classes and then offer some brief comments on the implications of these numbers.

Comments referring to the teacher's skill represented over 25% of the total. Among the high and moderate confidence groups, the proportion of answers in this category is even higher, ranging between 30% of all the comments for the high confidence group and 40% for the moderate group (3). The number of comments in this category drops dramatically towards the end of the scale with 7.5% for the responses in group 4 and

only 6% for those in group 5.

Comments focusing on Pronunciation, Native Dream, Language Use and the System had high incidence among the low confidence group. Of the 43 students who offered pronunciation as the reason for their opinion, 33 belonged to the low confidence group, 32 of the 36 people who mentioned the language used in class in their comments belonged to the low confidence group. Among the 18 comments pointing out the deficiencies of the Japanese English teaching system 12 come from the low confidence group, 4 from the moderate group and only 2 from the high confidence group. The “Native Dream” type of comment is absent among the high confidence group and scarce in the moderate group: 21 of the 24 comments of this type come from the low confidence group.

On the other hand, the role of the learner was frequently present in the comments of the high confidence and moderate confidence groups, but almost absent among the low confidence group. Only 2 comments of this type came from the low confidence group compared to 12 from the high

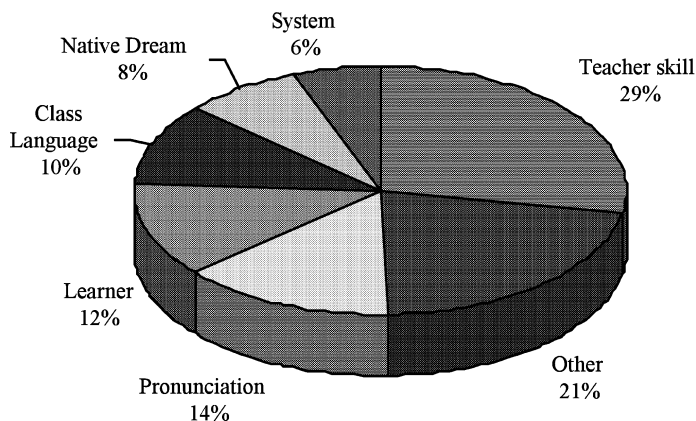


Figure 2 Comment types

confidence group and 23 from the moderate group.

3.4. Speculations on the significance of the data

The previous two sections have revealed two facts.

- a. Low confidence is prevalent among students regarding the Japanese school system and the ability of Japanese teachers to ensure the acquisition of fluent English.
- b. Success in the acquisition of English is attributed to different factors by students belonging to different confidence groups. The low confidence group, in particular, is set apart from the high confidence and moderate confidence groups in this respect.

In this section we will attempt to interpret these findings. Figures 3, 4 and 5 below show the distribution success factors across the three groups of respondents.

As can be seen from the charts, respondents in the high confidence and moderate confidence groups seem to regard the teacher and the

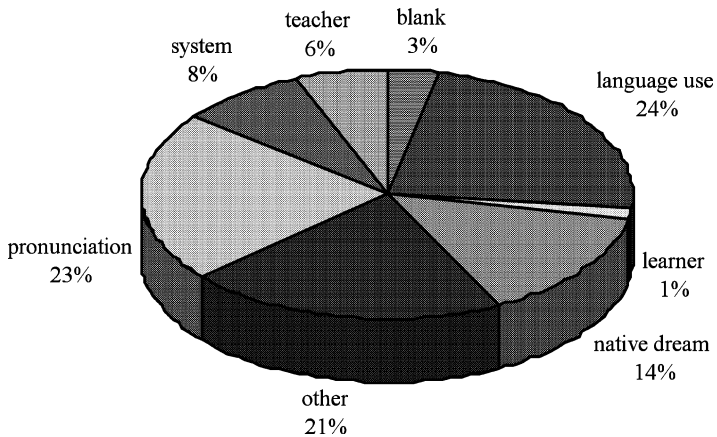


Figure 3 Success factors according to the low confidence group

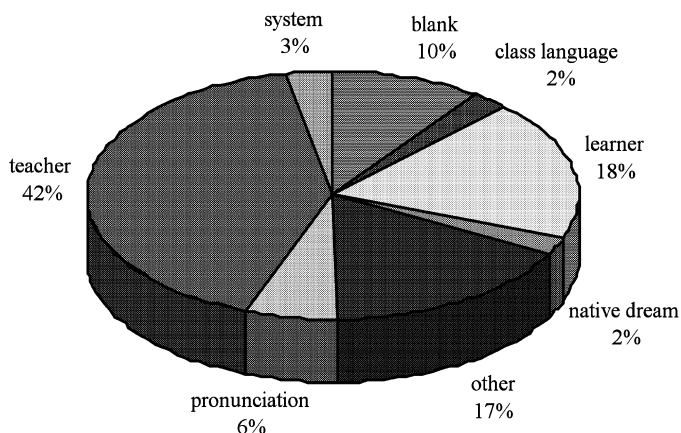


Figure 4 Success factors according to the moderate confidence group

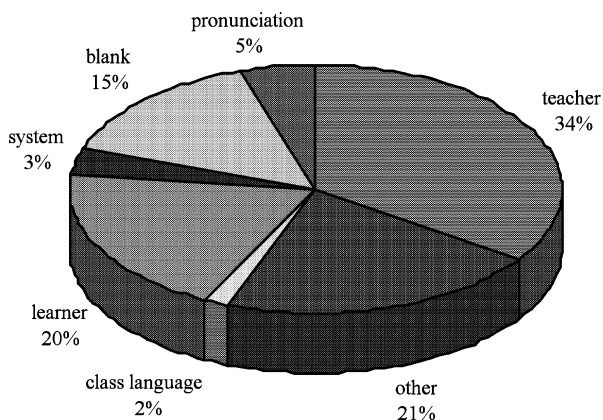


Figure 5 Success factors according to the high confidence group

learner as the most important variables for success. Pronunciation, the native or non-native status of the teacher, class language or the system play only a very limited role. We find the reverse in the case of the low confidence group: the teacher and the learner are rarely mentioned as

success factors, while the language used in class, pronunciation and the teacher's native language dominate. It appears that the use of Japanese during the English class, or alternatively, the lack of contact with spoken English, is associated with low confidence of the students. Possibly, we could go one step further and conclude that the failure of Japanese teachers to use English during class engenders this low confidence. Comments concerning the system have a similar thrust. Students complain about the excessive concern with grammar and translation, with exam training, at the expense of communicative activities. Again, we can discern an association between low confidence and the failure to use English communicatively in class.

The comments falling under the headings Pronunciation and Native Dream are more intriguing. Why are some students showing disproportionate concern for pronunciation when the world is full of people using English as a second or foreign language successfully in spite of the fact that they 'have an accent'. Why the distrust towards the capacity of the Japanese teacher to do his job successfully and the unquestioning trust in the abilities of the native speaker, when the majority of the English teachers in this world are not native speakers, yet they manage to produce fluent speakers in spite of this fact. And most importantly, why are these success factors invoked almost exclusively by the respondents in the low confidence group?

On closer consideration the Pronunciation and the Native Dream comments are simply voicing stereotypes of English education. The Pronunciation success factor represents the stereotype according to which "speaking a foreign language *well* is equivalent to speaking without accent". This stereotype ignores the role of lexical, syntactic and pragmatic factors in successful communication. The Native Dream

factor can be associated with the stereotypes claiming that “Japanese people are not good at foreign languages”, or “Only the elite, the lucky few who can get the undivided attention of a native speaker or have the chance to study abroad, can speak English fluently”. By making the native speaker a key factor, such stereotypes take success in acquiring English out of the grasp of the average learner. They also downplay the role of individual effort and good methodology. All these stereotypes presuppose a pessimistic view regarding the outcome of language learning, and it is not surprising that they are associated mainly with the low confidence group.

Our study has observed a correlation between the degree of confidence of the learner and a certain understanding of the factors determining success in language acquisition. It is premature, at this point, to assume a causal relation between the two, or to decide on the direction of this hypothetical causal relation. It is possible that learners suffering from low confidence try to justify their lack of confidence by positing unrealistic factors for success in language acquisition. It is also possible, that certain stereotypical views of language acquisition lead to low confidence in the learners. If we take into account the prevalence of these stereotypes in the mass media, and not only, such an explanation seems very plausible. Assuming that this is true, that certain stereotypes regarding success factors in language acquisition, combined with limited use of English in class by the Japanese teachers, are at the heart of the low confidence of Japanese learners of English, we could hypothesize that by challenging the stereotypes and increasing the amount of English used in class by the Japanese teachers, we could boost the learners’ self-confidence. This would be a desirable outcome considering the role of confidence in increasing motivation, and finally achievement.

4. Conclusion

The students' comments clearly suggest a demarcation of roles between native and non-native teachers. The demarcation is most obviously present in the case of the less confident students, who tend to think in stereotypes: they believe, without offering any justification, in the superiority of the native teacher and they place an unwarranted stress on pronunciation unlike the more confident students who quoted their own role or the role of the teacher as factors behind their success.

In Japan, the teacher's attitude, particularly the reluctance to use the target language in class, transmits a subliminal message that is at odds with the intended aim of communicative skills development. The fact that communicative teaching and skills have become associated with native speakers and NOT with the Japanese teachers, who are their most powerful role model, is detrimental to the students' learning of English. Students acquire the entrenched image that as non-natives they can never have a command of practical English skills. The solution is obvious. More English speaking by Japanese English teachers in class would have a more beneficial impact on students' acquisition of the desired skills than mere exposure to native use of the language.

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アンケート：高校における英語学習

私たちは、近年のコミュニケーションをめぐる多様な教授方法がどれほど効果的であるか、そしてモチベーションの高い生徒たちがどのようにして英語でのコミュニケーション方法を学ぶのかということを中心に研究しています。そこで、本研究へのご理解と同時に、本アンケートに対する皆さまのご協力をお願い致します。本調査は、日本の高校における英語コミュニケーション能力の教育方法を研究するプロジェクトの一部として行われます。ご協力いただく本アンケートによって、皆さまのプライバシーが侵害されることは一切ありませんので、ご安心ください。

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どのような学校に通っていらっしゃいましたか？ 公立 ・ 私立

英語の授業は週に何時間ありましたか？ _____ 時間 (1時間あたり = _____分)

あなたの一番の英語能力の強みは何ですか？以下の「活動および能力」リストからお選びください。

あなたにとって一番の英語能力の弱点は何ですか？以下の「活動および能力」リストからお選びください。

活動および能力

リーディング ライティング リスニング スピーキング 文法 発音 英文和訳 和文英訳

あなたが受けた英語の授業について

実際にあなたが受けた英語の授業名、その内容、その授業を担当した教師が授業中にどのくらい英語を使って授業をおこなっていたか、およびその授業の時間数を教えてください。

授業名	活動*	教師の英語使用比率**	時間/週

*先の「活動および能力」リストを参照してください。

**英語使用比率 0%⇨25%⇨50%⇨75%⇨100%

どの授業があなたにとって役にたちましたか？

なぜその授業があなたにとって役にたったのですか？理由を教えてください。

(例：英語がペラペラになった、語彙力がついた、翻訳能力がついた、大学入試の準備など)
