

Inquiries into EFL Education in Japan: Culture, Diversity, and Classroom Pedagogies

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Abstract

This article explores selected features regarding English education in Japan. Different views will be highlighted, illustrating Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and Native English Teachers (NETs) views regarding the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Japan. Furthermore, the latter half of the research will examine the role of instruction in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The author will look to examine if there is cultural diversity in Japan and will confer how the EFL classroom should be an exciting environment in which to learn EFL, and will show reasons why English is often taught the way it is because of certain parts of Japanese history. Findings argue that although grammar training can be left in the hands of competent JTEs, the addition of NETs can add extra beneficial elements to the EFL classroom. Additionally, the research will attempt to clarify how EFL relates pedagogically to certain cultural problems and values in Japan.

Keywords

Multiculturalism, native speakerism, cultural diversity, grammar, EFL education, second language acquisition, the input hypothesis, the acquisition learning hypothesis, the variability position, classroom instruction, pronunciation.

Introduction

Many see Japan as a homogeneous slate, a country that is free from diversity and dissimilar cultures, yet, although it is not a multicultural hotbed, Japan, has roots in both varied domestic and foreign influences. A stronger understanding of the assorted ethnic groups in Japan can help any English teacher to better understand where his/her audience is coming from. Arguably Japan is not a culturally diverse country; yet, problems abound due to many who try to deny this fact. This denial can come from all directions, both from the general population and also inside and outside governing bodies, some of who control, elicit, and change the education platform in Japan. For English education to move forward in Japan, people in the EFL field must be thoughtful to different learners.

Part One: Cultural Diversity in Japan

“Today’s teachers need access to a wide range of information to function well in the classroom” (Fillmore & Snow, 2000, p. 3). This decree couldn’t be truer than in the EFL classroom, especially when relating to the teaching of English in Japan. Foreigners who comes to Japan to teach English face many challenges when trying their hand at educating the local population. For, most Japanese have many preconceived notions, stigmatism, and stereotypes designed for foreigners, many go so far as to conceptualize that they live in a country made up of one culture, one people, who all share one history and by doing so denigrate all other cultures living in Japan to the sidelines. Therefore this plays a huge part with regards to teaching English in Japan, however, where is the cultural diversity one

might ask? Arguable there is cultural diversity in Japan and every foreign English teacher who teaches in Japan will at some point come in contact with the many sides of diversity in the classroom. The teaching of English in culturally diverse settings can be difficult, especially when in Japan, there exists a diversity dilemma.

What does culture mean. A look at a handful of dictionaries and definitions always encapsulate the proposal of *ideas, values, knowledge,* and *beliefs* which are *natural, passed down,* or *inherited* until a group of people share certain *traditions, actions, principles,* and *history*. Yet, according to Brightman, “every discussion about culture should begin with the acknowledgement that culture is a fluid, not static, concept” (2005, p. 1). Regarding Japanese history, we must look at some points of interest before we delve any further into the teaching of English in Japan. The Japanese population at large like holding on dearly to the notion that they stem from some sort of pure and allegedly untainted history, often attributed to the fact that they live as an island nation. There is a notion, which encapsulates this, which is often referred to as *Nihonjinron*, which roughly translates as ‘theories of Japanese cultural or racial uniqueness.’

However, today is it even possible to have a country that is both ‘pure’ racially and culturally? Currently, Japan pretends to be following other developed nations in its diversity practices. Speaking of Japan and its history, when it saw itself thrown into the global magnifying glass in the late 1800’s during the Meiji Era, the country had its hands deep in the pockets of other countries while it was trying to dominate much of Asia and Oceania during the Sino-Japanese wars, Russo-Japanese war, leading up to WWII. It was at this time that Japan, whether it realized it or not was beginning to introduce many different cultures and values into its

so called 'one cultured country' by various means. A few examples of this cultural change happened because of the forceful annexing of foreign labourers to Japan, Japanese having children out of wedlock abroad, and interracial relationships within Japan just to name a few. Now take into account hundreds of years of foreigners living in Japan such as: missionaries, labourers, academics, tourists, immigrants, not to mention the fact that Japan has been home to culturally diverse groups such as the Burakumin, Ainu, Ryukyuan and Yamato for centuries and one might be able to see how it might be culturally diverse. Lastly, starting sometime after WWII, Japan became a global powerhouse with regards to industry, innovation, and trade where many predominantly Japanese men found themselves working abroad (*Japanese Diaspora*). However, since the 1980's or the so-called *Bubble Era* have foreigners living in Japan increased more so (Lee, 2006, p. 2). Therefore, culture can exist "within the minds of people and is a (cognitive) system of knowledge that both gives rise to behaviour and is used to interpret experience (Ball & Farr, p. 6). Hence many Japanese realize diversity as an important mechanism in business whereby continuing its growth as a global economy, and this has slowly been shifting since the 1980's.

English in the Classroom

From the authors own experiences teaching in Japan, correlations can be found regarding how 'native' language teachers teach English in various settings. The teaching of English in culturally diverse settings is done by both native and foreign teachers alike where English is the language which is predominantly taught as a second language. But there are many pitfalls,

which can easily be observed in any classroom. One of the most troubling for a native speaker is to see a JTE using erroneous pronunciation to teach his/her students. It is even the more alarming to be in a classroom as a NET watching a JTE mangle English only to have his/her students repeat after them in the same contorted fashion. This is a common scenario that comes to fruition all too often. Another problem is viewing a JTE teach students by having the students do exercises on pure memorization (*yakudoku*), parroting, and the reading out of dated texts. Many argue that it is Japanese who are at the bottom with regards to conversation proficiency compared to many of their Asian counterparts because of perceived failures of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This leads to an interesting observation, that beyond phonemic, prosodic and stress aspects, it might be more a question relating to cultural aspects, why many Japanese students can't speak English conversationally.

Native Speakerism

Japan, the author had been told by a fellow Japanese teacher in the past, is a conservative country and it is because of this that Japanese students can't speak English well. It's easy how this could be perceived as an ignorant statement as the author has met proficient speakers here. The author has also been told that Japanese students are shy and don't want to stand out of the crowd, thanks to the *nail that sticks up gets hammered down* way of thinking. It is thought that all should be "expected to conform to societal ways and norms" where the "group needs and wants are placed above those of the individual" (Brightman, 2005, p. 5). Therefore, Japan is completely different from Canada for example. We are raised to be

different, to be bold and to find our own path. For Japanese however, many fundamentally discourage individuality. In any culture there are different levels of formality in language such as situational and hierarchical and this could not be truer in Japan, yet contradictorily Japanese can be some of the most extroverted people in the right situation. Japanese are famous at being able to decipher situations quite well.

Japanese know all about speaking on different plains possibly due to cultural issues. Regarding how they see English, many lack the communication skills or for various reasons aren't prepared to use what they have learned when given the opportunity to speak. It is only when an educator can make the learning environment relaxed that failure during learning is ok. The failure for educators in this country has been that there is this need to get English perfect, to try to attain a *superior* level. This should not be so, as what is language anyways? Even within countries where speakers learn a language from birth, many have terrible grammar and/or speaking skills. There are many different cultural settings in Canada for example and many Canadians don't speak the same way. Adrian Holliday writes that "native-speakerism is a pervasive ideology within EFL, characterized by the belief that 'native-speaker teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology" (2006, p. 385). With this 'ideal' through nativism comes an interesting notion, and this is that many Japanese ESL students expect a Caucasian teacher to teach them English, they for some reason have the image of 'white teacher, teaching English' in their heads. (Sleeter, 2001, p. 95). Regardless of any pre-conceived notions students have, the role of an English teacher in Japan and other countries is to try to get students to speak communicatively without fear of

failure or attaining perfection while deleting stereotypes of what they think learning English is or looks like. With the role of ideology in nativism is that another major problem arises because it works as an “iconic role” that puts a divider in the learner’s head where the learner is always cognizant that he or she is not speaking English natively in class during a speaking activity for example. The teaching of English in diverse settings has to be laid out in such a way that the student understands that the whole point of learning a language is to communicate effectively in it. Grammar, lexicon, context, these are all great things which can be learned and experienced but arguably when teaching English abroad, ground work has to be made to get the students comfortable enough so that they can learn English in a non-threatening environment which is free from preconceived ideals and false notions of what a language *should* be.

Grammar in the Classroom

In Japan, students seemingly are taught traditional grammar. Many who actually have studied over many years have great lexicons. However, not a lot of thought is put into the reason for learning grammar a certain way “schools simply transmit it from generation to generation with very little debate or understanding” (Hudson, 2002, p. 105). Sometimes the phrases one hears from students is so ‘textbook’ or unnatural that one can’t help but cringe at how ridiculous it sounds. In Hudson’s paper, descriptivism is beneficial because it allows native English teachers to explore their students, for them to try to use what they know and what works rather than to change things up and switch around what they’ve learned for years (p. 109). Many JTEs are lucky enough to have a native speaker in their class, and

at private schools this is for obvious reasons more prevalent, nevertheless at both public and private schools alike, sometimes a teacher will run into a student who has lived outside of Japan for a while. These students can usually speak quite well depending on how long they've lived in Japan for, if they've lived abroad, have a foreign parent, etc. However, most revert back into their shells as they don't want to be picked out by the teacher so educators have to be knowledgeable of this. It is unconstructive to treat these students as walking, talking dictionaries as bullying can occur from other students. However, if they aren't raised in Japan they will carry the class sometimes, but if they were raised in Japan they might speak English but for all intensive purposes they are careful not to stand out too much. It is thus, sometimes more important to be a coach (and sometimes referee) when teaching because many children come from very different cultural backgrounds even if they are Japanese, or there may be students with non-Japanese parents in the class too. Many children come from parents who are temporarily working in Japan and who are not Japanese, and as they aren't Japanese, they stick out a lot more and it is so hard to get these kids to speak up. Sometimes, if they are very confident or resilient or just don't care about what others say they give it there best. The author has met many Indonesian, Chinese and Korean children who have had a tough go at school in Japan, "interaction with someone who is racially or culturally different from one's self often leads to cognitive dissonance resulting in a shift in beliefs about that group" (McAllister & Irvine, 2000, p. 440). This is where empathy and an acute awareness to read the air come into play. It is very important to strike balances as it takes a lot more time to gain rapport with the general Japanese student population. This comes down to the sensitivity of the teacher as many have are not so in tune with the

subtleties of behaviour or know how to act within a culture (Zeichner, 1992, p. 9).

Outcomes

There are many factors in Japan relating to the English education system. Teachers must be supportive and affirmative constantly or there will be a lack of response from students. A constructivist view of teachers is the idea that discards a view of teachers as tools who merely apply focused strategies. Instead, teachers are seen as active thinkers and decision makers who create subject matter for their students. This allows the classroom of the EFL teacher to become safe and comforting. English classrooms must be a place where students can open up and do what they can't in their usual classes. NETs are in classrooms to erase boundaries, include 'foreign' students and to try to help all students accomplish the goal of communicating in English. Leaving grammar study to the Japanese teachers is ok, because it should be up to the NET to bring everything together and make the students speak up in any setting.

Part two: An Introduction into the Role of Instruction in Second Language Acquisition

The second part of the article looks to delve into the role of instruction in SLA. Many questions arise as to what is the most conducive way to learn a L2 be it, via traveling, living abroad or by learning a L2 by means of classroom instruction. For the purpose of this paper the author would like to incorporate how the Japanese learn English as one of the main points of reference when it comes to the role of instruction in SLA. Also,

the author will touch on the relationship between classroom L2 instruction and naturally occurring SLA. In addition, three areas of interest will be highlighted in the SLA realm: The Input Hypothesis, The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, and The Variability Position.

Classroom SLA instruction vs. naturally occurring SLA

Classroom instruction namely of EFL has many pros and cons. In Japan specifically, these can be quite evident. In a society where the majority of people are arguably adapt at following the status quo and following what they think works in the realm of EFL, it is no wonder why across the board it would appear, that English language education in Japan seems to create comparatively similar EFL students. Classroom learning can be quite distorted in Japan; this is mainly due to the fact that many teachers instruct and lecture rather than have their students' converse openly with each other through the use of conversational exercises and/or leader methods. It is thought that by repetition and the memorization of rules, words and concrete examples, that the second language learner (L2L) will become proficient in English. This however is not the case as is clearly seen by the extreme lack of proficient English pronunciation and speaking skills by the general native population of Japan. The assumption that focusing on linguistic forms helps the acquisition of English, thus better enabling the learner to internalize and understand English is a long running train of thought in Japan.

An analogy: a street fighter and a trained martial artist are standing toe to toe on a street corner, who would win the fight? Would it be the

street fighter who has had hands on knowledge of actual fighting or would it be the martial artist who has always done things structured through instructionalized and monitored sparring? The author would argue that each fighter would have a good chance at winning the fight. The L2L, no matter how young or old needs both instruction and real life situational practice. The author acknowledges that classroom instruction does have its place of course, this is obvious, but a L2L needs more if he/she wants to become really competent at the L2 he/she is learning, “the most important reason for incomplete acquisition in foreign language classroom settings is probably the lack of time available for contact with the language” (Lightbrown, 2003, p. 9). Trying to teach especially young students in Japan how to use colloquial English, opinions, feedback, or at least informal and easy conversation English is a prickly feat to accomplish. Thus, the only option is to introduce a great deal of conversation practice in the classroom as a boxer would while sparring in the gym, and then eventually attempting ‘real world’ speaking practice; this is especially relevant for a child L2L, “for the behaviourists the environment is of great importance as the input provided to the child is crucial” (Askland, 2010, p. 20) as the “child was seen to learn by imitation and correction” (Gass, 2004, p. 79). That is, L2L need instruction but when it comes to a language especially as diverse with regards to speaking (where reading and speaking are so vastly different) one must get ‘real world’ speaking practice to become proficient.

Language learning therefore relies on the idea of ‘stimulus-response’ and habit formation, “errors are to be avoided as they may become a permanent part of the learners L2” (Askland, 2010, p. 20). So if the behaviourists are to believe that the environment, in this case the classroom

is of 'great importance' then what do the innatists think? Askland states that "Innatists, however, claim that the environment is of much less importance, and consequently ascribe less importance to corrective feedback" (Askland, 2010, p. 20). He goes on to say that "Some researchers claim that languages are learned without recourse to corrective feedback" (Askland, 2010, p. 22). In Japan where English is basically not spoken by the local population, second language learning (SLL) might in fact only be found within an English classroom, as the "primary source of comprehensible input not otherwise available outside the classroom" (Krashen, 1985, p. 13). Thus, in the classroom is perhaps the only place where SLA can be assessed and offered feedback properly to the L2L, hence advancing students in their progression of EFL. However, there are still some that state that the instruction and feedback in SLA lack evidence to show that the "corrective feedback works" (Doughty, 2004, p. 72). It is a must that L2L be fed all parts of a L2; that instruction, writing, verbal practice and feedback are all necessary in creating a good atmosphere for a L2L to learn his/her targeted L2 before one tries to use what one has learned in an English speaking country.

The Input Hypothesis

Regarding teaching language correctly in the classroom, the role of grammar in classroom SLA has to be delved into. Krashen's Input Hypothesis is a very popular theory within SLA. His Input Hypothesis spotlights on the graspable input which causes language acquisition. In other words, the L2 input which a student receives must be dependant on the instructor. Krashen explains Input Hypothesis this way: "the input

hypothesis makes the following claim: a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to move from stage $i + 1$ is that the acquirer understand input that contains $i + 1$, where ‘understand’ means that the acquirer is focused on the meaning and not the form of the message (Krashen, 1982, p. 21). Krashen goes on to explain that the SLL,

“Acquires, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structure that is ‘a little beyond’ where we are now. How is this possible? How can we understand language that contains structures that we have not yet acquired? The answer to this apparent paradox is that we use more than our linguistic competence to help us understand. We also use context, our knowledge of the world, our extra-linguistic information to help us understand language directed at us.” (Krashen, 1982, p. 21)

Krashen argues that the instructor must focus on having the students undertake (in pair or group) activities or tasks which deal with acquisition problems or conversation. Then when students are face to face using English as the L2, they can use this contextual knowledge and ‘extra-linguistical information’ to perhaps better enable themselves to see how learning and using the L2 is a possibility. Thus, taking this into account, the Input Hypothesis is not concerned with learning but more with comprehensible input. However, Fang argues that while comprehensible input is important she criticizes that “incomprehensible input is also vital to SLA” (2010, p. 12). Krashen also touches on grammar teaching as a way to fulfill certain requests a L2L needs to pursue, that although everything won’t be learned or taken in, that indeed there are steps in which one tries to learn a L2. Therefore the use of cognisant grammar can only go so far,

that in fact, the classroom should be a place for communicative opportunities whereby L2 learners can best learn a language such as English. Taking all of this into account, feedback must be touched on as it is primarily how L2 learners can monitor how well they are doing. Feedback however in first language acquisition by children learners doesn't work so well as it has been stated by many authors that if they are corrected, as children so often are, they disregard the correction (White, 1989, p. 13).

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

Krashen has argued that “Learning cannot become acquisition and that fluency in a second or foreign language is due to what learners have acquired, not what they have learned” (Brown, 2000, p. 278). Acquisition, according to Krashen, is a subconscious process whereas learning is an active and conscious process involving the memorization of many formal linguistic rules. This ‘learning’ is specifically what Japanese students learn with regards to English i.e. grammar rules, reading, and writing but lack any actual acquisition. Krashen believes that second language learners should attempt to acquire linguistic rules subconsciously and in a natural way much like a child acquires his or her L1. However, this can prove to be difficult, yet many L2 learners do well at this depending on a person's determination and attitude mostly. Additionally, unless a L2L has a chance to use the L2 it is basically *impossible* for the learner to bring himself/herself to the point where children are when they learn their native language. Many people while learning a L2 also do not want to be brought down to that level, they want to excel and try as hard as possible to become fluent. Admittedly, in some countries one is illogically brought

down to a level where the locals don't believe the L2L can learn the local language whereas if an EFL learner is brought to America for example, people usually expect even a beginner to get on the train as it were and at least try to speak! There usually is just a short time for trial and error (of course mistakes are a necessary and important part of learning a language) as a L2L. The author having actually been told by quite a few Japanese that Japanese don't want to try speaking the English which with they have spent many years studying because Japanese are perfectionists and don't want to fail! This kind of rhetoric is all too common in Japan and is sad to hear as an educator, because with most things in life, the only way one masters something is arguably through failure and the subsequent practice which with failure always gives. Additionally, the author would also state that learning a L2 is more subconscious than conscious too. "We are generally not consciously aware of the rules of the languages we have acquired. Instead, we have a 'feel' for correctness. Grammatical sentences 'sound' right, or 'feel' right, and errors feel wrong, even if we do not consciously know what rule was violated" (Krashen, 1982, p. 17). There is a moment when an L2Ls use of grammatical components of the L2 come together and 'click'. After a time, some things are so over repeated and overused that they end up becoming a compass where one can rely on while learning other components of the L2. But how can a L2L come to this point without real world verbal conversation?

The Variability Position

The variability position highlights the importance of matching the learning process with the type of instruction. Instruction then must take

into account the target goals of the L2L. The instructor must realize that students will use English, as is the case in Japan, either during home stay or while traveling abroad or after high school in university. Therefore especially around grade 4 or 5 in Japan, grammar instruction has to be paired with conversation practise. Naturalized conversation should always be the end goal when teaching a L2 anyways the author would argue. This can be attained by highlighting communication in the classroom. Public and private school systems are light years apart in Japan, as might be expected in most countries. At private schools in Japan there seems to still be a lower amount of in class conversation practice compared with textbook grammar memorization study, especially regarding situational practice (this is not usually the case with native English teachers at private schools but with Japanese English teachers). In other Asian countries this gap isn't so evident however. For example, in Thailand, China and South Korea, the verbal communication levels which students possess in these countries generally are far more superior to those in Japan. This is from conversations with English educators who are working in those countries, studies which the author has read, and from travel experiences and hypothesizing. Generally students in other Asian countries have better conversation, pronunciation, and confidence skills in English (cultural matter perhaps) and are especially greater than that of those Japanese in Japan or abroad. During this author's undergrad in Canada for example, the foreign students with whom the author came into contact with, arguably 90% of the time those who had worse English verbal and pronunciation skills were Japanese. This could be formed into an essay unto itself but for this essay the author is merely touching on this just to show the reader that the Japanese student of English is far behind in pronunciation skills because of the lack of in-class

conversation practice. This is a major downfall and is often the topic of English teachers with whom the author communicates with, “how can we get them to speak?” However, Fang argues that class communication is just another minor player in the learning process of a L2L and that students differ due to “individual differences” (2010, p. 16). It would seem that there are many different ways of learning a language and that students often pick and choose what works best for them. But, to make a good verbal student of English, educators have to be cognisant of pushing in class conversation practice without so much lecturing.

Conclusion

Although in-class interaction works well for the L2L, it is one of many ways that L2Ls begin to speak another language than that of their own. There are many factors associated with SLA that verbal interaction alone can't take the credit single-handedly. Clearly classroom instruction takes on many forms of second language learning, such as grammar, writing, and listening exercises. There has to, however, be a final way to test this knowledge, and that is verbal output. Research on the role of interaction in L2 progress continually adds to the nature of the correlation between input, interaction, and SLA. How teachers of a L2 are theoretically to teach their students correctly through proper instruction and use of verbal output exercises continues to be an area of study that will continue to present challenges regarding our understanding of how L2Ls process and use L2 languages.

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