Examining Japanese Students Learning English
in an English Environment

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze the effects on Japanese students' achievement and motivation in language acquisition when English classes are taught in the target language. The study uses two classes of second grade high school students and two Japanese English teachers as participants in a quasi-experiment. Results from this study show that students may be able to increase their listening comprehension scores when they are taught in English. Even though students expressed more enjoyment of the material, the results showed increased student frustration in understanding and less teacher confidence with how well students understood their lessons.

I. Introduction

English teachers in Japan are often confronted with a fundamental problem: how to teach a foreign language (English) to a student body that is 99% ethnically Japanese (Ishiwata, 2011). Since most English classes taught in junior and senior high school are primarily conducted in Japanese by Japanese teachers, students are put in a disadvantageous position where they have little exposure to the target language. In one study of Japanese students enrolled in an Australian university, the students overwhelmingly preferred their Japanese English teachers to use more English in their classes (Yanagi, 2016). That study's participants indicated the lack of having a Japanese role model in their English classes as a negative influence on

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their language development. This paper will examine the impact of changing to an all English environment in a classroom of Japanese students being taught by a Japanese English teacher. Furthermore, this study will examine if senior high school students can show measurable improvement in their English listening comprehension scores after being taught in such an environment. This study is especially pertinent to Japanese English language teachers (JTEs) who use Japanese to conduct grammar translation of English material in the majority of their classes (Yu, 2016). This study will call into question current teaching methods and will give some insight into how teachers can improve students' language learning.

II. Problem statement

Some of the issues to explore related to improving English language uptake include Japanese students having difficulty obtaining communicative abilities in school (Takanashi, 2004), a culturally pervasive insecurity about using English to engage with non-Japanese people in business and academia (La Madeleine, 2005), and that many students score very poorly on standardized tests, which require speaking ability such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (Takanashi, 2004). How can professional English teachers in Japan improve this situation? Emphasis should be placed on making students realize that competence in a foreign language, especially English, is a tool they can use throughout their lives. As Milanovic states in his essay on the changing role of the English language, "English is the global language of business, is widespread on the Internet and the lingua franca in the academic research community" (2010, p.9). One would hope that this reality is not lost on students, but in the authors' opinion, students need to be made more aware of the importance of studying English.

Personal observation after living in Japan for over a decade leads the authors to conclude that English is not used extensively in Japanese media. Most non-Japanese films and TV programs are dubbed in Japanese with the average viewer becoming less tolerant of reading Japanese subtitles while watching (Shinichi, 2010). Subtitled works exist but are not the preferred method of consumption as viewers cannot enjoy the media while being burdened with reading text on the screen to understand the content (Shinichi, 2010). In addition, the vast majority of companies in Japan conduct their communications using Japanese, except for a few innovators such as Honda and Uniqlo (*Honda makes English official,* 2015) which have adopted English as their official corporate language. Therefore, it seems that if the motivation to learn English for pleasure (media consumption) or for personal gain (via work) is decreasing, then students will have very little incentive to improve their English language communicative skills in the classroom.

Improvements in the attitude to learn English can be gained via ground up strategies. Students should be moved away from the traditional grammar translation method of instruction which is conducted in Japanese. Instead, higher order thinking skills should be prioritized. In Lee and Lai's examination of using a flipped classroom model, they found that "asking students open-ended questions can engage them [students] in making comparisons, providing justification or conducting inquiry based on prior knowledge" (2017, p.2). Students will more likely make improvements in the target language when they engage their higher order thinking skills (Lundquist & Hill, 2009). More importantly, students will be able to see English as a tool for communication and not just a thing that should be studied by breaking it down into formulaic parts. In order to realize this learning environment, teachers who rely on using Japanese to teach English, especially Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs), will have to change their pedagogical approach.

This paper uses action research to identify the effects on students if their JTEs switch from using mostly Japanese in the classroom instruction to using mostly English. In detail, the questions to be examined are 1) How can students increase their exam results if their English classes are taught mostly in English, 2) In what way can conducting classes in English have a positive impact on students' attitudes to studying the language.

III. Literature review

Green and Fujita (2016) examine some of the variables which might influence a student's perspective on studying English. They researched dental students and compared them to information technology (IT) students from a different study. They examined the differences in the reasons the students were studying English between the two groups. They collected and compared data via Likert-scale surveys and analyzed the number of hours spent studying English outside the classroom using a two-way t-test. The research points out the importance teachers must place on students' motivation to study English.

Zawiah (2015) examines the overall condition of English as a Second Language in Japan by specifically looking at teaching English literature to university students. The researcher collected three forms of data for their research: writing samples and test papers; interviews with lecturers and students; and class observations. They argue there is an intrinsic gap between educators' expectations and the reality of teaching English to an audience that does not place much importance on the subject itself. They conclude with the argument that classes should be taught in both Japanese and English to give students a wider perspective on the material.

Sakurai (2014) looks at immersive classrooms and the effect they had on stu-

dents' uptake of the target language by examining immersion programs in the United States and comparing them to programs in Japan. The researcher collected data via questionnaires, individual interviews, class observation and audio recordings. He then analyzed the recorded audio. Specifically, Sakurai examined student uptake when teachers give corrective feedback. For the study, non-Japanese fifth grade mathematics teachers and a non-Japanese fifth-grade science teacher were used in an observational study. The researcher recorded and transcribed the interactions between the teachers and their students. In addition, qualitative interview data was also collected to support the research. His study tries to identify some of the reasons why immersion programs have not been as successful in Japan. Some of the reasons include students' current stage in interlanguage development, and students having less latent knowledge of the target language.

IV. Methodology

1. Research design

This study examined two classes of Japanese high-school second grade L2 students. Two Japanese English language teachers participated and assisted in this study. This study was structured as a quasi-experiment as it was impractical to randomize the participants. Two similar groups were compared with one group acting as the control group. The control group was called "Class Control" and the class that received the treatment was called "Class Try". These two classes have historically scored very similarly on English exams. This similar historical performance between the two groups minimized external factors and the influence of individual student performance on the research. The control group was taught as usual with a mixture of Japanese and English. The treatment group was taught mostly in English except for class procedural matters that were spoken in Japanese.

2. Research site and participants

This study was conducted with students (N = 92) at a private all-boys Catholic preparatory junior/senior high school in Japan. In addition, the two Japanese English teachers, JTE1 and JTE2 agreed to conduct the experiment, take surveys, and be interviewed at the end of the study. The students who participated in the study are second year high-school students who started studying English from their first year of junior high school for a cumulative four and a half years of near-daily English study. A portion of incoming junior high school students may have studied English prior to entering the school and therefore, may have been exposed to an all-English learning environment. These students are likely to respond to the treatment differently than students who never studied English before entering the school. Due to re-

strictions on time, this study was not able to identify the percentage of students who had prior exposure to English or to learning in an all English environment.

3. Instruments

A survey was created in Japanese to ask students how they felt about the prior week's English lessons. The survey was comprised of four Likert-scale questions designed to measure students' responses to salient areas of enquiry. Students ranked their satisfaction and understanding of the lesson on a five-point scale with 1 expressing strong disagreement and 5 expressing strong agreement. The survey was given to the students at the end of the week during their homeroom period. The students handed in the survey the following Monday morning to their homeroom teachers. While there was little motivation for students to collude, or copy survey results, the possibility of such activities might have affected the results from the surveys. In addition, students were told their names would be masked from the survey before being tabulated, giving them more motivation to give accurate responses to the questions. See Appendix A for the translated English version of the survey.

Another survey was created in English to collect data about the teacher's retrospective analysis of the class. The Likert-scale survey asked the teacher if the class went well and if they felt any differences when it came to student engagement or participation in the class. The survey asked the teachers to rank their perception of student behavior and understanding on a five-point scale with 1 expressing strong disagreement and 5 expressing strong agreement. The survey questions were based on data collected from the student surveys, allowing for further insight into the students' responses. See Appendix B for this survey.

Finally, a short quiz at the end of the one-week trial period was used to assess how well the students comprehended the week's lessons. The quiz was a combination of multiple choice questions and open-ended comprehension questions. These quizzes are part of their regular assessment done at irregular intervals. See Appendix C for an example quiz.

4. Procedures and Analysis

The research was conducted over a one-week period in November 2016. The curriculum for the week was the same between the two classes and coordinated between one of this report's authors and the two JTEs. One quantitative data point and two qualitative data points were collected at the end of the trial week. The quantitative data from the quiz results were totaled and averaged. Historical and post-trial results are displayed in Table 1 and Table 2. The data collected from the student and teacher Likert-scale surveys were averaged for each question and displayed in Table 3 and Table 4.

V. Results and Discussion

All students were given a quiz that involved listening to a conversation between two native English speakers. The conversion was not repeated to reflect a more natural listening environment. After listening, students had eight multiple choice comprehension questions and two write-in comprehension questions to complete. The results from the quantitative assessment are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1   No Treatment Historical Results from Beginning of Second Term 2016

Class A		Class B	
Student #	Quiz Average	Student #	Quiz Average
46	74%	46	71%

Table 2   Treatment Results from November 2016

Class Control (A)		Class Try (B)	
Student #	Quiz Average	Student #	Quiz Average
44*	71%	46	76%

Note. * Two absent students could not participate in the trial.

The data in Table 1 show how the two classes performed very similarly on a listening comprehension test before the treatment was attempted. The data in Table 2 show the results when the treatment was applied to "Class Try" over a one-week period.

There is evidence of a slight increase in listening comprehension quiz results for the Class Try (treatment) students. Although, due to circumstances beyond this study's control, two students were absent from the control group during the treatment period, which may have affected the results in Class Control. Historically, both Class Control and Class Try have scored between 70%-75% on similar tests.

1. Student survey

The next two data sources are based on the survey data. The survey was completed by all the students in both control and treatment groups. The results were then tabulated and averaged for each question. The results are summarized in Table 3. A higher score indicates stronger agreement with the question posed. The full surveys can be found in Appendix A.

Table 3   Control and Treatment Group Likert Results

Question	Class Control Average	Class Treatment Average
Q 1: The teacher was easy to understand.	3.4	1.8
Q 2: I enjoyed the lessons.	3.2	3.4
Q 3: I had to focus more than usual for this week's lessons.	2.2	3.9
Q 4: I feel I learned more than usual this week.	2.9	3.2

2. Student's opinion

Data collected from the student surveys was consistent with the researchers' expectations. That is, the control group that received their instruction in Japanese, as usual, showed greater confidence in understanding the teacher but were slightly indifferent when it came to lesson enjoyment or their own perceived effort in the class. They were also indifferent to the opinion that they learned more than usual in the class. The treatment group that received their lesson in English showed less confidence in understanding the teacher but a significant increase in required effort and a slight increase in perceived knowledge gained. They also expressed more enjoyment compared to the control group.

3. Teacher's survey

The teacher's survey was completed by the two participating JTEs at the end of the week. The questions were put in the same context as the student's survey questions to better understand the relationship between teacher and student perception. The results for each teacher's response is shown in Table 4. A higher score indicates stronger agreement with the question posed. The teacher's survey can be found in Appendix B.

Table 4   Control group and treatment teacher Likert results

Question	Control Teacher	Treatment Teacher
Q 1: I feel like most of the students understood my lessons.	4	2
Q 2: The students seemed to enjoy the lessons.	3	4
Q 3: Students were less sleepy and more engaged than usual.	2	4
Q 4: The students learned more than usual.	3	2

4. Teacher's opinion

Data collected from the teacher's survey show the control group's teacher ex-

pressed confidence that the students understood the lessons while being less confi-
dent about how much the students learned during the trial period. The treatment
group's teacher showed dissatisfaction with how easily the students understood the
lessons but was more satisfied with an increase in the students' engagement and en-
joyment of the lessons. Interestingly, the treatment group's teacher did not feel that
the student's net learning was greater during the trial period.

The results were shared with the other English teachers at the school and most
suggested doing the experiment again at the beginning of the school year with new
junior high school first grade students. On March 15, 2017, JTE1 explained to one
of the researchers that it was difficult for the students to adjust to a sudden change
in the teacher's teaching style. He reported that many students could not understand
why the teacher suddenly started using more English in the classroom. Conversely,
on March 13, 2017, JTE2 was very encouraged to see the increased motivation and
enjoyment in the treatment group's class when English was predominantly used. He
noted that Japanese English teachers should try to incorporate more English into
their lessons, although it should be done with better planning and teacher training.

The results from surveys and quiz results resulted in many interesting discus-
sion points to consider further research. Considering the results broadly, indicate
that the language used to teach English to students has an influence on student per-
ception and possible uptake of the target language. However, this study was too lim-
ited in its scope and methods to make any causal conclusions.

VI. Limitations and future actions

There were limiting factors that could not be eliminated from this study. This
included students' surprise and perceived difficulty to listen to an all-English lesson
from a Japanese teacher. The teachers also had different English abilities. One
teacher might be better at spoken English and the other better at grammatical as-
pects of English. In addition, students have a natural bias either positively or nega-
tively toward each teacher. One teacher might be more popular among a greater per-
centage of the students thus influencing their opinion of the class. Other limiting
factors include students who were absent during the study thus skewing the results
more than normal.

It is clear that these confounding factors in the study made it difficult to reach
any causation arguments about the effects of Japanese English teachers using more
English in the classroom. However, there are some indicators that show additional
research in this area is warranted. The next step will be doing the study again at the
beginning of the school year, reducing the shock factor to the students. Importantly,
prior to conducting the study, appropriate teacher training and administration buy-in

would make the study stronger. In addition, the study would need to minimize the effect of absent students and individual student biases on quantitative assessment results. To do so, a randomized experiment should be used instead of the quasi-experiment model adopted in this study. Lastly, a mixed-methods approach in surveying the students would allow participants to explain their answers and provide further detail and insight into their responses.

VII. Conclusion

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has indicated a desire to improve Japan's historically poor standardized testing scores (Kameda, 2013) in English by introducing English classes earlier into the education system and by improving the method of teaching used by Japanese English teachers. "The blueprint [MEXT's education plan] . . . calls for English classes in junior high schools to be 'basically' taught in English with the goal of nurturing the 'ability to understand familiar topics and exchange simple information as well as express simple thoughts'" (Kameda, 2013, para. 6). The strategy is ambitious and should be allowed to succeed but additional data need to be collected from classrooms across Japan in a randomized study before deciding on the best way to proceed.

Administrators and decision-makers cannot ignore the reality teachers face in the classroom. More action-research needs to be conducted in this area to find the best combination of instructional strategies that will have the biggest impact on Japanese learners of English. The authors of this study are convinced that Japanese students can excel at English given the right tools and guidance from their teachers.

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Appendix A

Student survey

Please choose the answer that best corresponds with your feeling towards the statement.

Question 1: The teacher was easy to understand.				
5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
Question 2: I enjoyed the lessons.				
5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
Question 3: I had to focus more than usual for this week's lessons.				
5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
Question 4: I feel I learned more than usual this week.				
5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree

Appendix B

Teacher survey

Please choose the answer that best corresponds with your feeling towards the statement.

Question 1: I feel like most of the students understood my lessons.				
5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
Question 2: The students seemed to enjoy the lessons.				
5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
Question 3: Students were less sleepy and more engaged than usual.				
5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
Question 4: The students learned more than usual.				
5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree

Appendix C

Listening Comprehension Quiz

Please listen to the presentation about Dr. Pettit and answer the five questions below. Questions three, four and five must be answered in full sentences.

1) What's the most exciting thing he has experienced?

  a) Seeing his children being born

  b) Seeing the space shuttle

  c) Seeing the Earth from space

2) What did he invent?

  a) A new rocket

  b) A new kind of coffee

  c) A new mug that can be used in space

3) Why did he invent it?

4) What was the best part about being in space?

5) What was the worst part about being in space?