

## Paths to Increased Motivation in the Japanese EFL Classroom

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| 著者                           | Scura Vincent   |
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# Paths to Increased Motivation in the Japanese EFL Classroom

Vincent Scura<sup>1)</sup>\*

1) Center for the Advancement of Higher Education, Tohoku University

## Introduction

Despite the importance Japanese society places on English language acquisition, many Japanese students struggle with fluency. While Japan's school system mandates the study of a foreign language, usually schools only offer English because it is required for high school and university entrance examinations. As such, most Japanese high school graduates have had at least six years of English instruction and one year of conversation lessons. In addition, commercial English schools (*eikaiwa gakkou*) and test preparatory schools (*juku*), which include most school subjects in their curriculum, including English, are extremely popular. Nevertheless, English standards remain comparatively poor, with the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores ranking Japan "lowest among all Asian nations except North Korea" (Kwan, 2002). This paper investigates the development of English education in Japan to identify some of the historical aspects underlying low fluency levels. It also considers motivation theory, collaboration education theory, and recent education reforms, as well as the influence of youth culture, with respect to English language education. Lastly, it provides recommendations on how instructors can leverage education theory, reforms, and modern electronic technology-which saturates current Japanese youth culture-to implement teaching techniques such as Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), thereby increasing student motivation and performance levels.

## History of English in Japan's English Educational System

Japan's commercial and diplomatic contact with Western nations in the early Meiji period (1868-1912) prompted the new Japanese government to initiate the study of European languages, with English being central to the curriculum given the military might of the United States. Interestingly, some educators even proposed that English become an official language of the nation (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). In 1872, the government instituted a program that sent students abroad to study English and also prescribed that the Kaisei School (later, Tokyo University) teach all subjects in English. A decade later, education officials mandated that junior high schools provide six hours of foreign language instruction per week, again with English predominating. During this period, the government also invited as many as 3,000 Westerners to Japan to teach science, technology, architecture, and medicine to help Japan "catch up" with the West (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). However, as the century closed, many Japanese felt that Japan had sufficiently "caught up," prompting a popular backlash against English education (Imura, 2003). By 1883, Tokyo University reverted to Japanese as the medium of instruction and prominent educators

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\* ) 連絡先 : 〒980-8576 宮城県仙台市青葉区川内41 東北大学高等教育開発推進センター scura@he.tohoku.ac.jp

shelved the idea of establishing English as an official language of Japan.

Despite the backlash, English endured as a regular school subject. By the early twentieth century, education officials had developed a bifurcated approach to English education, establishing both an oral and written classroom syllabus. The official government curriculum mandated the use of the “Gouin Method,” a progressive, oral-aural system (a precursor to the audio-lingual approach) to foster speaking fluency (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). The “Gouin Method”, together with standardized English test preparation drills (*juken-eigo*), shaped the English syllabus. However, because most entrance and other standardized examinations contained no speaking or listening components, actual classroom practices tended to focus more on *juken-eigo* rather than on Gouin’s fluency-enhancing audio-linguistic techniques, reducing student motivation to practice speaking. Additionally, student motivation was further diminished when rising political tensions between Japan and the United States led the government to initiate an official suppression of English. In fact, by 1938, several top educators were calling for the complete abolition of English education in public schools. Although English was still taught for military and other specialized purposes, by 1942 the government had dismissed all British and American lecturers teaching English in Japanese universities (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006).

After the war, the Allied Powers occupation force reformed the Japanese education system, emphasizing liberal arts, science, and technology ostensibly to support the rapid recovery of the nation and to bolster its economy to compete in global markets (Asian Info.org, 2004). The new education laws still required foreign language to be part of the curriculum, with the vast majority of school

administrators, as in the Meiji Era, selecting English because of its necessity in passing the intensely competitive high school and university entrance exams (Kumabe, 1978).

### Post-War Education Approach

Despite the post-war revamp, Japanese education – in all subjects – continued to be strictly controlled by the guidelines imposed by the Ministry of Education’s (MOE’s) “Course of Study” directives, which limited teachers both in the content that they could present and teaching methods they could employ (Barnes Mack-Cozzo, 2002). With respect to English, instruction consisted of students being issued a reader and a grammar text, with written translations serving as the primary language acquisition tool (Kitao et al., 1985). As a result, the post-war directives mirrored the pre-war approach, with the curriculum concentrating on teaching students how to pass examinations, but not providing instruction in oral fluency. Consequently, students rarely developed the intrinsic motivation needed to become fluent in the spoken language, which would enable them to effectively communicate in a real-world environment (Barnes Mack-Cozzo, 2002). Further, many teachers themselves often did not have a high level of English conversational ability, as teacher quality was measured only by written examinations of vocabulary and grammar (Fukuzawa, 1996). These instructional paradigms indicate that Japanese schools taught English as a purely academic subject rather than as a living language, reducing the motivation for students to use English outside the classroom environment. Shimo (2002) indicates that with respect to modern Japanese youth culture, contemporary students feel that studying English without also understanding its larger, practical context is useless. In fact, MacDonald (2005) and Shimo (2002) argue that the pedantic approach to education is precisely what has led to major recent

educational problems, such as the refusal to attend school (*futouku*) and the breakdown of classroom discipline (*gakkyu houkai*) in Japan.

## Trends in Teaching English as a Second Language and Reforms in Education

In response to these issues, the MOE instituted several major reforms in the past twenty years, including employing thousands of native English-speaking assistant teachers through the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, requiring one year of “Oral Communication” in high schools and, starting in 2009, mandating “fun” communicative English lessons in primary schools. With this increased focus on spoken English, educators are once again evoking the century-old “English as an Official Language” idea. In an effort to streamline bureaucratic efficiency and further advance education reforms, the government amalgamated several ministries to form the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2001. The following year, MEXT implemented a new “Integrated Curriculum” concept. The root of the idea stipulates that educators should provide “human rights education” to their students. Specifically, with respect to second language acquisition, it suggests that foreign language classes should form part of a larger multicultural education process that should include information about contemporary foreign culture. (Shimo, 2002). Examples include highlighting the experiences of foreigners living in Japan and lessons in multiculturalism (Shimo, 2002).

The Integrated Curriculum also includes recent theories about second language acquisition, which suggest that the instructional process should be student-centered, rather than teacher-centered (MacDonald, 2005). The student-centered approach requires the teacher to reach consensus with both peers and students about the learning materials and the ways it should be taught (Clair, et al., 1998). To this end, the

MEXT transferred substantial authority for curricular decisions to localized school boards, which decentralized the educational decision-making process (MacDonald, 2005). Although the Integrated Curriculum embraces the theory of student-centered teaching and emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant content, there remains significant uncertainty among Japanese teachers about the specific approaches that they should use in the classroom. In short, the Integrated Curriculum reforms are primarily theoretical, with no guidance available to teachers about specific methods to improve student participation and motivation. Moreover, even with the effort by some universities to modify their English language examinations to include oral interviews, which created an incentive for students to learn spoken, as well as written English, Japanese English test scores still lag far behind those of other developed Asian countries (Kwan, 2002). The poor performance on standardized tests suggests that current approaches to English language instruction are not sufficient to motivate students to acquire both written and conversational fluency.

Research in second language acquisition indicates that participation and motivation are important factors in maintaining student engagement and learning. Reigel (2005) investigated the benefits of applying positive feedback mechanisms in second language learning and found that motivation significantly affected second language attainment. Negative classroom experiences related to language abilities become part of the stored experience of students, leading to the perception and attitude that they are incapable of learning the language or speaking adequately, thereby greatly reducing motivation (Nespor, 1987). Burnett (2002) demonstrated that a positive student-teacher relationship reduces this anxiety, particularly when it

comes to speaking in the foreign language either individually or in groups. This illustrates that while the relationship between beliefs, motivation, and second language acquisition is part of the student's complex internal feedback loops shaping their learning process, each learner's individual interaction with the teacher also produces feedback influencing motivation and the learning outcome (Mallows, 2002). Dornyei (2001) therefore, argues that the most critical feature in achieving successful learning results is the teacher's ability to motivate students.

Motivation encompasses both intrinsic motivation (the internal desire to acquire knowledge because it is perceived as a benefit) and extrinsic motivation (the desire to acquire knowledge to achieve an external goal, such as passing an examination). The positive feedback loop created by good classroom experiences fosters intrinsic motivation and the student's desire to continue learning (Lumsden, 1994). Extrinsic motivation can continue to motivate a student to perform learning tasks despite a negative feedback loop, but the learning activity is viewed as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself (Vockell, 2001). Based on this framework, the objective of teachers of English as a second language should be to foster intrinsic motivation.

### **Strategies to Motivate Students of English as a Foreign Language in Japan**

To increase intrinsic motivation among students, English instructors should employ methods that allow them to use English in authentic, culturally relevant contexts. One method is to employ CALL utilizing the Internet and e-learning platforms in the classroom. The versatility of these technologies offers instructors the opportunity to develop a wide variety of motivational approaches based on the concept of Computer-supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL). Bruffee (1993) defines collaborative learning as "a

acculturative process that helps students become members of knowledge communities whose common property is different from the common property of the knowledge communities they already belong to" (p.3). In one application, Basharina (2007) demonstrated that students in an English language classroom in Japan who worked jointly in an on-line project with students in a similar classroom in another non-English speaking nation showed enhanced student motivation to learn English for practical communication purposes. Moreover, as all participants are second language learners, they are less anxious in communicating with each other than with a native English speaker in that they are engaging their peers, rather than authority figures (Basharina, 2007). Roschelle and Teasley (1995) argue that employing collaborative methods enhances learning motivation because it places students in situations that include "coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem" (p.70). Therefore, CSCL fosters motivation effectively when the content is relevant for the age group and involves comparative global youth cultures.

MALL is also a key strategy that exploits CSCL's motivational properties (Chinnery, 2006). MALL involves using mobile communication devices like cell phones and iPods to increase language involvement and English exposure outside the classroom. Mobile phones can be especially valuable because they require students to communicate with peers and tutors verbally – a component noticeably absent in the traditional English language classroom in Japan. Students can also use mobile devices to access the Internet to communicate in written English. Though the iPod is limited to being a recording and listening device, it can still augment the learning experience by allowing students to listen to music or record conversations in English. As these types of mobile

devices are ubiquitous and integral components of youth culture in Japan, Chinnery (2006) suggests that MALL could greatly increase student engagement and motivation.

Teachers of EFL in Japan should also consider the use of voice chat rooms and social networking sites on the Internet through mobile devices as a means of providing students with social interaction to increase intrinsic motivation. Students using voice chat rooms tend to correct themselves more frequently than students using text chat, with the corrections related primarily to pronunciation and leading to more effective speaking skills over the long term (Jepson, 2005). Chat rooms are also deeply related to youth culture and provide the opportunity to practically apply verbal language skills. An additional benefit of the chat room approach is that the student can use the skills outside the classroom to interact with other English speakers, regardless of their location.

Some of the drawbacks of CSCL, however, are the increased amount of time instructors must devote to coordinating efforts outside the classroom and monitoring a student's on-line work, given the inappropriateness of some websites. However, because many computer programs support automated data collection applications regarding the student's time and use of the systems, instructors can quickly obtain information about the type of materials used and the amount of time spent on them.

## Conclusion

This study revealed that after over a century of English education in Japan, the modern EFL classroom still fails to supply the intrinsic motivation crucial to attaining fluency-despite the nation's deep commitment to English instruction. Nevertheless, recent educational reforms in Japan have

theoretically introduced a student-centered philosophy of teaching English and permitted the use of computer technology and other educational advances in classrooms. However, even as these reforms empower teachers to implement new and innovative methods, there remains considerable uncertainty about specific student-based classroom approaches, and uncertainty about rapidly changing e-technologies and the inherent content-related hazards of Internet. As such, these strategies are also bound to increase instructor workloads.

Despite these challenges, the reforms represent an important first step in freeing instructors from a variety of curricular constraints, allowing them the opportunity to implement new, creative, and effective techniques such as CSCL, CALL, MALL that are proven to foster student motivation and reduce language anxiety, thereby improving fluency. It is clear that incorporating popular aspects of current youth culture-notably technologies common among students-in lesson plans amplifies the relevancy of English in students' lives, provides a practical context, and increases their desire to learn English. Leveraging MEXT's recent educational reforms and current youth culture is crucial to foster instructor effectiveness, student motivation, and ultimately, greater fluency.

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