

# Encouraging Active Learning in Japanese Undergraduates in an English Sociolinguistics Course

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## 1. Introduction

Without courses which give a theoretical context for English study, undergraduate courses for English majors can become simply practical English classes. On the other hand, in many universities, it is difficult to provide content-based courses in English due to students' lack of English ability: courses offered are either practical English classes (usually taught by native speakers of English), and lectures in Japanese from Japanese teaching staff on theoretical or content-based material relating to the English language and literature, or to aspects of Western culture. This paper describes an attempt to engage students in content-based lectures in English on Sociolinguistics by providing the information in easy English without compromising on the content offered, and to engage them with the course material through the introduction of active learning techniques.

A course known as "English and Society" has been offered to undergraduates in the International English Course of the Department of Literature at Kyoto Koka Women's University since the 2012 academic year, as one of their choices of compulsory specialized courses. While the content has been kept to that described in the curriculum when the Department was founded, the methods of teaching have been modified over the course of three academic years to make content more accessible and understandable to the students, and to encourage the students to become active learners, rather than passive recipients of instructor-centred lecture content.

English major students currently studying in Kyoto Koka Women's University had an average TOEIC score of 331 points in their first term after entering university, a reflection of decreasing scholastic standards for university students in general. It should be noted that a figure of 300 points is said to be the borderline of the TOEIC test's ability to actually measure the test-taker's English ability with any accuracy. Student scores on the TOEIC test increase to an average of 495 points in their final year, but this figure disguises the large spread of scores: in the autumn term of the 2013 academic year, for example, scores ranged from 285 to 760 points. Since content-based courses are open to any students who wish to take them, it is not possible to set any performance-based requirements for attendance on courses, and the students taking the course may have extremely disparate levels of English ability.

Apart from the huge range of commercial skills-based textbooks for Japanese learners of English, there are many content-based texts on themes such as tourism, psychology, ecology, nursing or business. However, an extensive search of the main publishers in the Japanese market showed that there is a lack of availability of content-based texts on sociolinguistics, presumably due to a lack of demand. Thus, it was necessary to create a complete set of teaching materials from scratch.

In line with the founding principles of the University, the contents were also designed to help the students develop a "compassionate heart", and also contribute to their social and cultural awareness. This aim was expressed through material for raising the students' awareness of the social context of language study, for example through addressing such issues as language-based discrimination. Since an explicit aim of the Department of Literature is intercultural communication and understanding, the course contents were

designed to allow them to reflect objectively on the social situation in Japan, rather than being merely an academic study of a 'foreign' language.

## 2. Coursework Development

### a. Syllabus Development

Course contents were finalised at the curriculum development stage of the Department of Literature, and were chosen to give the students a basic grasp of sociolinguistic issues. An introductory course in sociolinguistics can be expected to cover knowledge areas such as the following: analysis of the structure and social rules of conversations, speech communities, development of language, intercultural contact and mutual influence, pidgins and creoles, language change, the relationship between language and identity (how language can be used to signal and interpret aspects of social identity), dialect, gender, social class, bilingualism and multilingualism, solidarity and politeness, and English hegemony. All these areas were incorporated into the English and Society course syllabus.

The first semester course, English and Society I, examines basic concepts in sociolinguistics, and also encourages active learning in students through group discussions and presentations. The practical listening exercises in class enable the students to recognize and distinguish between different ways of speaking English. The fifteen weeks of the course are arranged as follows:

1. Sociolinguistics: the interface between language and society.
2. Communication and conversation.
3. Conversation and context: deconstructing conversations (1).
4. Deconstructing conversations (2): student presentations on actual conversations.
5. Deconstructing conversations (3): telephone conversations.
6. Deconstructing conversations (4): turn-taking.
7. Politeness (1): face and power.
8. Politeness (2): ways of expressing politeness (and impoliteness).
9. Development of geographical differences (dialects).
10. Listening to UK dialects: Cockney.
11. Suppression and promotion of dialect: written and spoken English in Scotland.
12. Speech community and repertoire
13. World English dialects: Singlish, Engrish.
14. Student presentations furthering aspects of course content (1)
15. Student presentations furthering aspects of course content (2)

The second semester course, English and Society II, is aimed at giving the students a firmer theoretical understanding of the social processes which lead to changes in English usage. It addresses a central idea that despite the existence of a so-called Standard English, the usage of English varies with time, social class, gender, age, ethnicity and social groupings. The classes explore some of these differences, using relevant listening and discussion materials.

1. A brief review of topics basic sociolinguistic concepts

2. Social class and English
3. Promoting 'standard' English: Scenes from "My Fair Lady"
4. Gendered English (1)
5. Gendered English (2): markedness
6. Language as violence
7. Language and ethnicity.
8. Listening to Black British English.
9. Bilingualism and multilingualism.
10. Ethnic identity and language rights.
11. Subcultures.
12. Student presentations
13. Student presentations.
14. Criticism and evaluation of presentations
15. English as a World language: considering future directions for the English language.

#### b. Developing Material in Easy English

As mentioned above, there was found to be no suitable content-based textbooks for Japanese learners of English available, so the contents of undergraduate texts for English-speaking university students were screened, and the first version of this course in the 2012 academic year was taught using Spolsky's 1998 text, a basic introductory text for English-speaking undergraduates. This text is a popular, concise and long-selling introductory text in British universities. Nevertheless, it was primarily chosen due to the dearth of material available which had been especially written for Japanese students studying English.

Using the text in class proved to be very time-consuming and slow-moving. However, it can be said that the students gained a sense of achievement from studying the text, which, in contrast to texts used in their other classes, they knew to be a textbook for native English-speaking students. The content was not particularly difficult, being an introductory text, but the English was difficult and convoluted. For example, the passage below, the introductory paragraph from a section on speech communities (that is, a theoretical grouping of all the people who speak a particular language), has little actual content, but is opaque to the students.

"The non-hyphenated fields of linguistics like phonology, semantics, and syntax focus on the language system ideally abstracted from all social context. Psycholinguistics deals with the individual speaker's acquisition and use of language, and relates this to mental processes. Sociolinguistics is concerned with language *in situ* and *in vivo*, alive in its geographical and social setting and space. What this space is like, we now consider. To start with, because our main interest is in social matters, we will deal with social space, and look for the location of varieties of speech with definable social units." (Spolsky, 1998:24)

This paragraph does no more than give the information that sociolinguistics studies language in its social and geographical (place) context, and that the subsequent section will look at the geographical context. This simple content is elaborated into very difficult prose, with grammatical structures unfamiliar to the students, highly academic vocabulary, unnecessary jargon, irrelevant information and Latin phrases.

The students are expected to check the meanings of individual words in their dictionaries before coming to class, but that in itself is not sufficient for understanding this piece of text, and moreover, since this course is aimed at studying sociolinguistic-based content, merely checking the meanings of vocabulary items represents inefficient use of the students' available study time. More problematic are sentences such as "What this space

is like, we now consider.” An embedded question appears in a sentence where the phrases are in the reverse order to any the students might generally encounter in their general English studies, and indeed, because of its archaic resonance, this is not a sentence that native English-speaking students would generally write. The phrase, “the non-hyphenated fields of linguistics” when referring to phonology, semantics and syntax suggests the expectations of previous knowledge about what might be the “hyphenated fields of linguistics” without explaining what is meant. Since the text is purportedly an introductory one, this reference will be obscure for English-speaking university students, as well as English learners, and is therefore redundant. The Latin phrases ‘*in situ*’ and ‘*in vivo*’ could easily be replaced by English equivalents, such as ‘in its place’ and ‘in life’ (or ‘in real life situations’). Apart from these writing problems, the first two sentences describe what will not be considered in the text, using references that require some specialist knowledge, and thus do little to contribute to understanding the target content.

When preparing course materials, it was necessary to use a simplified version of English (variously known by names such as Easy English, Simplified English, Basic English, Special English and Plain English). In such Easy English, vocabulary should be limited to around 1000 of the most commonly used words, the sentences should be short and address only one topic. Idioms and the passive voice should be avoided, as should unfamiliar grammatical structures. Based on these criteria, the paragraph above from Spolsky could be written as follows:

“Fields of linguistics like phonology, semantics, and syntax study language without considering social context, and psycholinguistics studies the mental processes of language learning. Sociolinguistics studies language in real life in its geographical and social setting and space. In this unit, we will first look at social space, and look for varieties of speech in society.” (A modified version of Spolsky, 1998:24)

Moreover, the first sentence could be omitted for brevity, since it contains irrelevant and unhelpful material.

For the English and Society courses, a hand out was given at the start of each class. It was read aloud by the instructor and/or students, and explained through paraphrases of the content. Important points were listed on the chalk board by the instructor, and the students were expected to make notes of these for further review outside class. Similar material to that covered by Spolsky in the section for which the introduction is given above can be seen in the following page.

### Geographical Differences in Speech

Sociolinguistics studies language in its **geographical setting** (place) as well as the social settings we have looked at so far. The language of families, neighbourhoods, villages, cities, states, countries or regions can be studied.

#### Dialect

Speech varies with place. People who speak the same language have different words for the same thing, different meanings for the same word, or different pronunciations of the same word.

When William Caxton printed the first book in English in 1473, he did not know whether to use northern or southern English forms. For example, he wondered whether to use *eggys* or *eyren* for *eggs* in one of his books.

There are at least two factors in the formation of dialect:

1. All languages change over time: new words are added to deal with new concepts; contact with other languages changes the original language; there are gradual slight changes in the sounds used for speaking the words.
2. People who communicate with each other tend to speak in a similar way.

Even when groups of people start off speaking the same language, as they move away from each other, or interact with different groups of languages, their way of speaking will gradually become different from other groups. The longer groups are isolated, the more different their way of speaking will be. On the other hand, with modern communications, language varieties are becoming more and more similar.

Key words are given in bold font, sentence structures are kept as simple as possible, using grammatical structures that students are familiar with, the text is broken up with bullet points and academic words are limited to those relating to the specialist knowledge presented in the content. The students were encouraged to file these hand outs neatly so that they could be used during the final exam, when it is permissible to bring any material into the exam.

#### c. Practical Work and Exercises in Class

Since most Japanese students encounter mainly “standard” (usually American) English, they have little exposure to other, non-standard forms of English, so presentation of practical material is essential to the course. Each subtheme of the course was illustrated by examples. A wide variety of formats (video or audio clips, songs, written forms, or transcriptions) were used, and indeed, variety is preferable to stimulate the students’ interest.

Given the huge diversity in English ability among students taking the course, it is unrealistic to expect all but the very best students to be able to understand a 90-minute lecture in English, and even these students will have difficulty concentrating for such a long period, so the typical session was broken down into different sections. Generally, slightly less than the first half of a 90-minute session was in a lecture-type format on the topic to be studied, with student questions and comments, and then the latter half consisted of practical examples to illustrate the topic and student discussions. In such discussions and group work, students could analyse and interpret material, and conjecture about meaning and significance, rather than being instructed

about it, contributing to their autonomy as learners.

As an adjunct to the content material shown in Section b above about dialect, for example, students were instructed about the ways in which Cockney rhyming slang differs from so-called standard English, and then given examples of songs which use it, specifically, songs by Ian Dury and the Blockheads from their 1977 album, "New Boots and Panties". One of the songs featuring both the London accent and rhyming slang is "My Old Man". The song is 3:40 minutes long, making it a manageable length for an in-class listening exercise. The students are first given an opportunity to listen to the song and try to pick up words, phrases and overall meaning. It is mainly students who have experience of study abroad who are able to pick out longer meaningful phrases at this stage.

Next, they are given a hand out with the song lyrics, and asked to think about the meaning of words and phrases that they are not familiar with, and discuss their suggestions with a partner or in a small group. Some students are able to identify the phrase "my old man" as meaning 'my father', and the word "cigs" as an abbreviation of 'cigarettes'. Dialect phrases, such as "made a racket" (meaning 'made a lot of noise'), are explained by the instructor, since they are difficult to guess at. After the students have gained an understanding of the meaning, they hear the song again and have the opportunity to reference the lyrics.

Finally, the particular features of the accent are explained. In the example of the London accent, the letter 'h' is not pronounced at the beginning of a word, so the word "handsome" in the song sounds like 'andsome'. Most dialects of English in the United Kingdom have particular regional vowel sounds, and verbal examples are given by the instructor, so that the students can practise their pronunciation. They are then given the opportunity to listen to the song again, this time to focus on pronunciation.

The whole exercise from start to finish, including broadcasting of the song, explanations, pronunciation practise and pair discussion time should take about half of the time available for the class.

Apart from songs, other materials can be used where appropriate. Small segments of movies on DVD can be used to illustrate particular themes or ways of speaking, and can be used as described above with transcriptions of contents and explanations. Care should be taken to use illustrative examples of appropriate length for appropriate use of classroom time (no longer than several minutes). There is now a wealth of home recording available on Internet sources, which can be carefully mined for appropriate and effective content.

Recordings from the Speech Accent Archive (Weinberger, 2014) were particularly useful for illustrating different ways of speaking depending on geographical area. It contains recordings of thousands of people reciting the same paragraph, and gives biographical and geographical information about each recording. Phonetic transcriptions are also available for many of the contributions. The students can concentrate on the delivery and pronunciation, having gained an idea of the content. The paragraph recited contains all the consonant, vowel and clusters that are found in standard American English:

"Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: Six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station." (Weinberger, 2014).

### 3. Student Presentations: Students as Active Learners

In order to foster the students' development as active learners, the expectation was that students should have enough grounding in the subject matter to be able to apply it and collect their own material to present to

other students. Since they tend to be from a different generation to the course instructor, it can be surmised that they have a different set of cultural references and sources of materials. Presentations actually far exceeded expectations, and were of a consistently high level in terms of content. The presentations described here took place in the spring term of 2014 for English and Society I, and in the autumn term of the 2013 academic year for English and Society II.

For the presentations for English and Society I (in July, 2014), students were told to choose one of two options related to the course content, and make a presentation ten to fifteen minutes long, either alone or with a partner. The instructions for the first option were to find an example of an English dialect in literature, films and TV, or music. Students were instructed to explain the meaning of words, and how the dialect is different from Standard English. The other option was to find an example of a conversation in English in literature, films or TV. Students were instructed to quote the spoken words, and then analyse the social meanings behind these words.

There were thirteen presentations, with some given by pairs of students. Of these, seven presentations utilized popular songs from a variety of genres (pop, hip hop, R&B, hard rock, punk and folk). As mentioned before, pop songs generally have the advantage of being a manageable length to play in full during a presentation, and also have the lyrics available, either with a CD or via Internet sources. As an example, in one presentation, a student discussed the use of “ain’t” to replace ‘am not’, ‘is not’ and ‘are not’ in the song, “Where is Love” by the Black-Eyed Peas, a hip hop group. Additionally, the student explained other unfamiliar or slang words and phrases, and also gave information on the social background to hip hop culture, which is associated with American gang culture.

Slang was also illustrated by a student who introduced a list of US slang expressions (for example, “she is in the family way”) in the form of a quiz, and asked the other students to guess their meanings. Each person had one of the answers, and had to explain their answer to the other students. The student presenter then gave supplementary explanations where necessary.

There were two contributions based on literature. One presentation described the use of the Southern USA dialect as shown in conversations in the novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and pointed out the special features of the dialect (with translations into standard English), and discussed the use of dialect for characterisation in the novel. The student also gave an explanation of the offensiveness of the word “nigger” used by characters in the story. Another presentation gave an analysis of poverty and bullying as seen through conversations in a children’s storybook, *The Hundred Dresses*, and discussed how the conversations express the power relations between the characters in the story.

Three presentations dealt with regional accents, which included explanations of the particular features of each dialect example, and also listening material. One of the presentations was on the Geordie dialect of north-east England, experienced by a student who had spent time studying there. Another student described Aussie English, and included light-hearted stories about language problems she encountered during her home stay experience, and illustrated the presentation with an example of a TV commercial using Aussie English. A third presentation explained Hinglish and used an amusing clip from the animated TV series, *The Simpsons*, showing a character who is the owner of a neighbourhood convenience store using Hinglish.

Presentations for English and Society II (in January, 2014) were given the instruction that they could further explore themes studied during the course (language and social class, gendered language, language and discrimination, language and harassment, Black English, bilingualism and multilingualism). Students were also given the option of presenting new topics that were not covered but which could conceivably be understood



as falling within the field of sociolinguistics. Any materials that illustrate the chosen theme could be used: articles and written material, CDs or DVDs. There were a total of nine presentations, either alone or in pairs.

An excellent contribution was given about hate speech, with the presenters asking other students to identify whether or not certain expressions constituted hate speech, in order to encourage debate and active participation. They then explained what could constitute hate speech, and then gave a further quiz for groups of students to make guesses about missing words from examples of discriminatory comments from famous people which had appeared in the media, such as Sergio Garcia's comment that he would serve chitlins to Tiger Woods, a comment which reflects the history of Black slavery in America: the students explained that, without having consciousness of the social background, it is difficult to identify discriminatory or hate speech.

Other contributions on ethnic discrimination explained the use of discriminatory words in "The Long Walk Home", a film about civil rights icon, Rosa Parks. The student presenter gave some background about the civil rights movement, and also related the explanation to discriminatory words about ethnicity in the Japanese language. The civil rights movement was also discussed in a presentation about the meaning of lyrics in the Beatles' 1968 song, "Blackbird", which was written against a social climate of racial tensions in America. The student presenter analysed the song for hidden meanings about ethnicity, and described the social milieu of the time. In contrast, one presentation gave an effective complement to these contributions with a presentation about the explicitly anti-discrimination song, "The Blood Song" (2002) by Kirk Franklin, and explained the ethnic and social background of the performers.

Another presenter used excerpts from the movie, "Chicago" (2002) to explain how the American legal system discriminates against people who are unable to speak standard English, either because they are immigrants, or because they use slang, a dialect, gender-inappropriate ways of speaking, or swear words, which result in a lack of access to legal justice. Additionally, presentations were given about the verbal abuse about disability experienced by the character with autism in the 1988 movie, "Rain Man", and words used in newspaper articles to perpetrate gender discrimination on a female teacher in the movie, "Mona Lisa Smile".

Further presentations described the difference between American and British English, giving examples, and scenes from a TV comedy, "Full House" were used to show the use of slang expressions and age-inappropriate catch phrases to build comedic characterisations.

The content and skill of the presentations show that these students are high level active learners, since they found fresh material that illustrates their understanding of the topics discussed, without merely repeating what they have learned in class. Moreover, they developed quizzes to encourage discussion. Their chosen topics, relating to such problems as discrimination and difference, also clearly demonstrated that the goal of fostering their "compassionate hearts" had also been achieved.

#### 4. Summary

Kyoto Koka Women's University has made the promotion of active learning through all Departments a top priority at institutional level, and is currently making great efforts to achieve this goal through staff training and awareness raising, and development of facilities, such as open learning areas for students' group and individual student. Moreover, the University cherishes its founding principles, which are based on Buddhist precepts, and actively uses them as a foundation for the education offered. Naturally, it is for each instructor to develop his or her own strategy for the implementation of this goal, since each course and each group of students has their own particular needs and requirements. Such a shift from traditional lecturer-centred



teaching may require significant changes in class management, if there is to be no loss of content. This paper has described one attempt to introduce active learning methods into a content-based English lecture course for Japanese undergraduates, in order to provide a possible model for courses in other subject areas.

Several stages of development and planning are necessary: course contents and syllabus development, course materials development, and development of class exercises and practical work. Preparation at each stage must be undertaken with the explicit aim of promoting active learning, as described in each relevant section of the paper. Contents cannot be sacrificed, since they are an explicit part of the degree area that students are expected to achieve in order to graduate. Nonetheless, class materials must be set at an appropriate level in order to be helpful and understandable to the students. Discussions and short presentations throughout the course must be used to communicate to the students that they are the most important part of the learning equation, and that the classes are not being undertaken for the benefit of the instructor.

It can be seen from the descriptions of the student presentations in Section 3 that the students on the English and Society courses have achieved a very high level of learner autonomy: they have understood the course material studied and are able to apply it to different examples or aspects of the field studied. Moreover, they are able to express a compassionate attitude, as evidenced by both their presentation content and their support for other students' learning by providing quizzes and discussion opportunities to their peers. This paper has not explicitly discussed grading and evaluation of students, but a high weighting was given to the presentation component, and grades also incorporated a final written test. Most presentations could be evaluated highly on their content, relevance, delivery, and also the efforts made by the students. Their evident progress as active learners should prove to be a valuable resource for both the individual and society after the students graduate.

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