

Enhancing Japanese Student Engagement: The Voice of Experience

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Abstract

Okayama University has seen recently an upsurge in the number of courses taught in English. While students generally like the English-medium courses for the abundance and novelty of information available in them, they tend to show hesitance to participate, which sometimes leads to dissatisfaction with the courses. International faculty members also feel something is amiss because they do not understand why students fail to be responsive. Clearly, enhancement of student participation and mitigation of the alienating teaching experience of international faculty are challenges to effective administration of global studies. To that end, the quiet cultivation of optimal demographics for English-medium courses is currently the most effective strategy.

Keywords: global studies, English-medium courses, Japanese student participation, international faculty experience, factors enhancing participation

I. Introduction

In recent years, Okayama University (OU) has seen an upsurge in the number of courses taught in English. Currently, the university has two undergraduate-level flagship programs associated with the English-medium courses: The Special Program for Global Human Resource Development (SPGHRD)¹ and the Discovery Program for Global Learners². It also has International Master Course (IMaC) Okayama, an educational program organized by the university's Graduate School of Natural Science and Technology, which provides a high-level English-medium education course to international and Japanese students enrolled together in specific master classes. The upsurge in the English-medium courses at OU reflects the nation-wide trend, which goes back at least two decades, during which the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been applying pressures on schools and universities to increase the English-medium activities in the courses that they offer.³ At OU, the upsurge was precipitated by the university's participation in the MEXT-sponsored Top Global University Project (TGUP), which requires or incentivizes participating institutions to increase courses taught in English.⁴

The SPGHRD is one of the two pillars that support the PRIME (Practical Interactive Mode for Education) program with which OU has been selected for participation in TGUP.⁵ As a *de facto* manager of the SPGHRD, I have been engaged for about five years in almost all aspects of the

program, including teaching many of its core courses.⁶ While teaching these courses, I have found myself concerned about the same issue that engaged me 20 or so years ago when I taught English at two private universities in the Tokyo area: Now as then, I find many students hesitant to participate in class.

The international faculty members like myself who teach most of English-medium courses at OU share with Japanese students a great enthusiasm for English-medium courses. The students like the novelty of having the information that is more abundantly available in the English-medium courses and texts than in Japanese-medium ones. At the same time, they also seem to feel somewhat dissatisfied because they do not fully grasp what is taught. International faculty members also feel puzzled because they do not understand why students often doze off in class, come to class unprepared, and fail to be responsive. They feel their efforts to prepare for and teach the courses are inadequately appreciated by students; they harbor sometimes a similar feeling about the university itself.

II. Value of Student Participation

One of the challenges of educating modern Japanese students is overcoming their reluctance to take the intellectual initiative. This reluctance impacts Japanese students, not only in English, but also in a wide range of disciplines, including creativity, critical thinking, and innovation.⁷

While teaching English in the Tokyo area, I wrote a paper which comprehensively examined the cultural aspects of teaching English in Japan. In that paper, I offered concrete strategies for helping students achieve their goals of learning English in the first two years of college. These strategies which mainly aimed at boosting student motivation⁸ and inducing greater participation in class were:

- (1) Let students speak;
 - (2) Take a piecemeal approach to grammar and pronunciation;
 - (3) Provide background information on English and the cultures of English-speaking countries;
- and
- (4) Give the students role models that have successfully acquired English as second language.

As the title of the paper—"Teaching English to Japanese College Students: based on the Observation of Cultural Factors Affecting the Classroom" (Kim, 2005-6)—shows, these strategies were formulated on the basis of my personal observations.

Fast forward 20 years to the present: as I teach such courses as *Cross-cultural Understanding*; *Communication Skills Development*; *Japan in the Age of Globalization*; *Lecture on Japanese Culture*; *Global Studies*; *Creativity, Critical Thinking & Innovation (CCTI)*; *Sociology of Globalization*, etc., I still think the general principle in the strategies that I suggested earlier are sound and even validated to

a certain extent by another occasion of focused observation. To wit, the general principle is: The more students participate in class, the better they understand the course contents.

Thus, based also on my classroom observations over the years at OU⁹, I find student participation valuable in that it tends to:

- Habituate students to taking intellectual initiative;
- Avoid cultivating intellectual passivity and mindless conformism;
- Increase student confidence;
- Increase student skill in using critical thinking techniques;
- Cultivate methods of creativity.

I find these benefits also occur in contents-based English-medium courses, even though my original strategies were designed with only English language teaching in mind. Not only is student participation beneficial, some courses, such as *Creativity, Critical Thinking & Innovation (CCTI)*, cannot be taught at all without student cooperation in the form of active involvement. Thus, in my current educational terrain, I find myself asking: What is the best strategy to increase the participation and comprehension levels of Japanese students in English medium courses?

III. Methodology

In this paper, I rely heavily on observation methods. By closely observing students' behavior in the process of learning, classroom teachers can learn much about how students learn (Angelo & Cross, 1998). Often, students are not learning as much or as well as is expected. By the time teachers notice the gap in what they teach and what students are learning, it is frequently too late to remedy the problems. To avoid such an unhappy situation, both teachers and students need to monitor or observe learning throughout the duration of the course.

The use of systematic observation as a means for measuring behavior and functional relations is firmly rooted in empiricism, where minimally inferential measurement procedures and quantitative evaluation of event sequences are posited to be the best strategy for learning about cause-effect relations (Haynes & O'Brien, 2002). Currently, behavioral observation is one of the most frequently used, and extensively evaluated, methods of behavioral assessment for children, families, and adults (Hops, Davis, & Longoria, 1995; recited from Haynes & O'Brien, 2002). This approach is based on the position that direct observation of behavior requires less inference, and as a result, is less prone to error.

Also, following the advice that the design of a modest classroom experiment helps the teacher grasp better the status of students' learning (Angelo & Cross, 1998), I have organized my classroom observations in the last five years into a quasi-experimental design with two groups to compare. For an experiment usually involves two groups of subjects, an experimental group and a control or a

comparison group. In an experimental design, the experimental group receives a treatment of some sort (such as a new textbook or a different method of teaching), while the control group receives no treatment (or the comparison group receives a different treatment). The control or the comparison group is crucially important in all experimental research, for it enables the researcher to determine whether the treatment has had an effect or whether one treatment is more effective than another (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2011).

The details of our two groups thus formulated are as follows:

1. Control Group: For the first couple years of the Special Program for Global Human Resource Development at OU, only the students in the program were allowed into Global Core courses. These were entirely Japanese and almost all freshmen. Some of these classes were conducted in Japanese language with Japanese textbooks. Others were conducted in English with English textbooks
2. Experimental Group: After several years, I managed to persuade the University to open Global Core courses under my jurisdiction to all university students. This had the effect of introducing more Japanese sophomores to the class. It also opened the classes to foreign students. Some of these foreign students were native English speakers (e.g. Americans and Canadians); Others were not native speakers, but otherwise fluent in English (e.g. Malaysians, Germans, Italians, and Serbs). Yet other foreign students were neither native nor fluent (e.g. Chinese and Koreans).

Finally, the numbers of students in the two groups have ranged from 5 to 200 and stabilized over the years to 20 to 50, depending on the circumstances and peculiarities of the courses.

IV. Factors Enhancing Participation of Japanese Students

Upon comparing the two groups and analyzing other variables involved, I have found five factors that contribute to the enhancement of student participation. Here, the factors are listed in the order of ascending impact, since the degree of impact is important to note for formulating classroom strategy.

Factor 1: Having lecture and textbook in Japanese vs. Having lecture and textbook in English

Not surprisingly Japanese are more likely to participate if the material presentation is in their native language. However, even when the presentation was in their native language, I found that participation was less frequent and satisfactory than I wished it to be.

Factor 2: Having the teacher step aside and allow the students to make a presentation of the material, followed by having the presenting students lead a discussion with the other students about the material.

Classes are traditionally conducted by lecture by the teacher and then accepting questions from the students or encouraging discussions with questions, a method which results in low student participation. However, when the teacher's lecture is replaced by having students give a presentation on the material and lead the discussion themselves, the other students are less intimidated and participate more.

There is a downside to allowing the students to do presentations that should be noted—namely that student presentations tend to be less articulate and complete than a teacher would have done. One strategy is to allow the students to make their presentation and then have the teacher supplement it with a more complete perspective. However, this must be done selectively and tactfully, for the implicit criticism of the incompleteness of the student presentation may itself choke off participation.

Factor 3: Increased number of sophomores

In the first couple of years when I taught, a typical class would have about 3% sophomores while the rest would be freshmen. When the sophomores were such a small percentage, they would allow the freshmen to set the tone for the class, and unfortunately that tone was reserved and silent. After the opening up of the classes to the whole school, I usually found that the percentage of sophomores had increased to about 10 – 12%. At this percentage, a critical mass was achieved, and the sophomores felt emboldened to participate a bit more. Their participation would encourage the freshman to participate as well.

Factor 4: Presence of students with study-abroad experience

Students who have been overseas in study-abroad programs and students who have studied overseas are more likely to have the confidence to participate. The more of them that are present, the greater the participation. Again, once some are participating, others will follow.

Factor 5: Having a larger percentage of foreign students

Foreign students are more likely to participate on their own initiative. Once they do so, Japanese will follow their lead and participate themselves. The more foreign students there are in a class, the more likely this is to happen. However, numbers alone are not the whole story. The fluency of the foreign students is itself a factor. I observe that even 1 or 2 Americans/Canadians (native speakers) or Malays/Germans/Italians/Serbs (fluent, but not native) will result in a significantly enhanced Japanese

participation rate.

With Chinese and Korean students (non-native, non-fluent), however, it takes a larger number to impact participation. The rule seems to be: less than 5 Chinese students will allow the Japanese students to set the tone of the class and therefore be reserved and silent; 5 or more Chinese students will be emboldened by their numbers to participate and thereby inspire the Japanese students to participate. The relative reluctance of Chinese students as compared to other foreign students appears to be insecurity about language skills. Even so, they are more likely to take the initiative in participating.

V. Discussion

The paradigm for teaching English-medium courses is shifting from teaching the English language itself to teaching disciplinary, or rather, interdisciplinary contents. This shift is natural given that globalization is advancing everywhere in all human spheres of life including education. Many Japanese students go abroad for travel, study, internship, and language training. More foreign students and workers are coming to Japan. The sheer volume of interactions that Japanese people have with their foreign counterparts has greatly increased these days in comparison to, say, 20 years ago. More significantly, interdisciplinary curricula for undergraduate teaching are seen to develop capabilities that are important for students' participation in the current and future workforce and to expose them to some of the more complex issues facing society today (Yates, Woelert, Millar & O'Connor, 2017). Reflecting the changing trends and values of Japanese society, English-medium courses are increasingly being taught to accommodate the globalizing needs of schools and universities.

The case in point is well demonstrated by the emphasis that the SPAcE (Special Program for Academic English)¹⁰ places on *Introduction to Global Studies* course. The course covers interdisciplinary contents more than a language course usually does. This phenomenon reflects the current hiring pattern of Japanese universities. Due to various factors such as population decline, Japanese university system cuts, and university mergers and closings, the use of short-term contracts is widespread, creating job insecurity among both Japanese and non-Japanese academics. Although the job market is tight overall, however, recent changes in student intake and educational methods have created a number of new job opportunities in interdisciplinary fields such as culture, history, global studies, and translation studies (Williams, May 2019).

Since English-medium teaching is favored by the current emphasis on global and international relations, it faces greater expectations than ever before. As a result, it is important to discern and overcome the obstacles to successful English-medium teaching. In our haste to accommodate the newly added global dimension to classroom teaching, we often forget that the English-medium teaching/learning is also an occasion of cross-cultural interaction.¹¹ Even when the English-medium

courses mainly concerned English language teaching, cultural factors that the students bring to the classroom received much scholarly attention. Nakane's studies (2005, 2007), conducted in an English-speaking country, showed that silence was one of the major problems for the Japanese students in the English medium classrooms, both for themselves and for their lecturers, for it prevented the establishment of rapport between them and their lecturers. She also found that foreign lecturers mistakenly viewed Japanese students as being shy, when this was not the case for the students outside of the classroom. She also found that foreign teachers interpreted the silence of students in class as being due to the students having a negative attitude and lack of commitment to their studies, where in fact, this was not at all the case.

For better classroom management, the foreign teacher is called on to be aware of the characteristics of Japanese communicative style and the passive style of learning Japanese students experience in high school and even the multiplicity of views concerning the role the university plays in Japanese society and the way Japanese students view their university experience (Norris, 2004). The four main characteristics of Japanese communicative style are group-mindedness, consensual decision-making, formalized or ritualized speechmaking, and listener responsibility for clear communication (Anderson, 1993). Anderson (1993) contrasts these with the western characteristics of individuality, decision by majority, spontaneous expression of "creative" or "original" ideas in public and private interaction, and speaker responsibility for clear communication.

Of particular relevance to the foreign teacher dealing with Japanese university students on a daily basis in the classroom is the importance of giving Japanese youths a chance to mature during their university years. In junior and senior high school, Japanese students' lives are, on the whole, strictly regulated with little room for independence (Norris, 2004).¹² The four years of university, then, becomes an important time of transition, a time when the focus is more on growing up, personal development, social skills, and taking on individual responsibility than on academic study related to a future job (Norris, 2004). Williams (May 2019) advises prospective foreign teachers applying for jobs at Japanese universities to avoid the common stereotype that Japanese students are passive and withdrawn in class, for such a stereotype may be a self-fulfilling expectation. While many students are more reluctant to volunteer questions and ideas, often this can be overcome by varying the teaching approach. Overall, Williams notes, hard-working, intellectually curious, rewarding students are as likely to be found in Japan as in other countries.

The lesson we can draw from viewing English-medium courses as cross-cultural encounters is that both foreign teachers and Japanese students alike must make necessary cultural adjustments. In normal educational settings, teachers are expected to bear a greater responsibility than the students. If this logic holds, the foreign teachers should bear the onus of making cultural adjustments more heavily than their Japanese students.¹³ Figuring out a good formula for a successful classroom

management is one way of doing the foreign teacher's part in making the cultural adjustment.

Even at OU, it is no longer unusual to see foreign students sitting in the same classroom with Japanese students. The number of foreign students is increasing through various programs such as EPOK (Exchange Program Okayama), Campus Asia, and GDP (Discovery Program for Global Learners). Taking advantage of the current educational situation, foreign teachers may use foreign students as a valuable teaching resource for their classroom management at OU or other Japanese universities. The factors discussed above that enhance the participation of Japanese students may be used separately or in conjunction with each other. Of course, further research needs to be done on what other cultural or educational factors cause the reluctance of Japanese students to participate in class.¹⁴ Also, further research needs to be done on how to cultivate participation and involvement among Japanese students.

VI. Conclusions

Multiple factors can affect the participation rate of Japanese students. However, the factors that cause the most improvement are demographic (i.e. sophomore vs. freshman, native English speaker vs. non-native English speaker vs. Japanese student). One strategy I have found particularly useful is to form a class with a proportion of Japanese to English-speaking students that is about 5 to 1. In any case, the quiet cultivation of optimal demographics for English-medium classes is currently the most effective strategy for improving Japanese student participation and comprehension.

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¹ The Institute of Global Human Resource Development (IGHRD) has been in charge of the Special Program for Global Human Resource Development (SPGHRD or “G Course”), which is an important component of OU’s commitment to the Top Global University Project. Each year, SPGHRD recruits about 100 OU students. As of 2019, approximately 600—from freshmen to senior and even to graduate—students representing all (13) faculties of the University are registered. For more details, see Kim (2017a).

² In addition to the “G Course,” IGHRD came to house the Discovery Program for Global Learners (“GDP”) under its roof. Each year, GDP recruits 30 Japanese and 30 international freshmen students. As of 2019, approximately 180 students are registered.

³ See an NHK broadcasting reported in Kim (2005-6, p. 6).

⁴ The aim of TGUP is enhancement of the global competitiveness of Japanese universities. For details of TGUP, see the Outline of the project on the MEXT’s official homepage. (<https://tgu.mext.go.jp/en/about/index.html>).

⁵ The PRIME, whose professed goal is to produce global practical-oriented human resources, stands on two pillars: 3 powers (Liberal arts strength, Linguistic ability, Professional knowledge) and 3 faces (Intersociety, Interdiscipline, Interculture). The production of the 3 powers falls squarely on the shoulders of SPGHRD.

⁶ For a complete list of courses, see the SPGHRD’s 2018 Curriculum in the Appendix to Kim (2018).

⁷ I have addressed the historical origins of this phenomenon in the drive to rapid modernization and western imitation in the Meiji era, which resulted in the discrediting of traditional culture, the transformation of the Japanese culture of harmony into a dry culture of conformity, thus causing a subsequent inferiority complex about creativity (Kim, 2017b).

⁸ For a full explanation of why and how these items boost student motivation, see pp. 10-11 of the paper (Kim, 2005-6).

⁹ Also five years as before when I taught English.

¹⁰ The English portion of the SPGHRD’s curriculum (cf. Note 6 above).

¹¹ *Cross-cultural Understanding* is a course in itself which is included even in my own global studies teaching repertoire.

¹² On the other hand, they learn the ideals of endurance, maximum effort, and self-denial (Norris, 2004).

¹³ The responsibility of the university as the site of education is an entirely different story, however. The university should do everything that it can to ameliorate the classroom interactions on the campus, particularly those between international faculty and the Japanese students. On the occasion of making a presentation (on the theme of internationalizing the faculty) at QS APPLE 2019 higher education conference in Fukuoka, I have heard from participating presenters that Kyushu University and Tokyo University have some committees or programs to integrate international faculty members to the wider university community, of which concerns include education at and even management of the university. I have yet to see this kind of welcome development at OU.

¹⁴ I also have researched the cultural factors that I considered to affect the English-medium classroom and discussed them under the rubrics of (1) Political Pressures on the Teachers, (2) Students’ Attitude, and (3) Myth of the Superiority of Teaching by Native Speakers of English (Kim, 2005-6, pp. 7-9).