
Why don't Japanese students like to speak English in their task-based classes?

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This paper is going to discuss why Japanese students do not like to speak English in their task-based classes. Before coming to the point, I would like to mention several stories that took place almost twenty years ago.

A Singaporean lady came to visit Japan for sightseeing; she asked some questions in English to some passengers standing near a train in order to know whether it was the right train for her to take. However, none of the Japanese passengers could understand her English. Before returning to Singapore, she made the remark that she felt very sorry about the poor command of English in the society of Japan. This is what westerners in Japan often talk about: the Japanese lack of proficiency in the English language. It has often been pointed out that Japanese people do not speak fluent English, though they have studied the language almost ten years in schools.

As this is also a famous episode, Elizabeth Taylor, a famous Hollywood actress was disappointed that none of the Japanese audience could understand her key-note speech when she once visited Japan to join the international conference for women's rights. She seemed to have expected the Japanese audience to discuss the women's rights issues in English. One can give many examples like these relating to the Japanese lack of proficiency of English.

It might be pointed out that it is hard for ordinary Japanese to maintain a strong motivation to brush up their English in a monolingual society. Then, how about the proficiency of English in a multilingual society such as Singapore or Hong Kong? Don't they have any serious issues about leaning English?

I once watched a T.V. program reporting that children in Singapore can not even write their name in their ancestors' language, Chinese, though they can speak fluent English. Characters are referred to as the cultural backbone of their ancestors. I wonder why Chinese descendants stress English even at the expense of their mother tongue.

To maintain one's mother tongue is to have a means to convey one's message as efficiently as possible. One might say that some Singaporean children have an indecisive command of both English and Chinese. One can also observe this in some pupils of international schools of Japan; they can manage daily conversation in English, however, their grammar is not correct enough to write English compositions. Moreover, they speak Japanese with an English accent, probably because it sounds cool to them. These children may have found themselves in English-speaking environments since early childhood. Generally speaking, children are more flexible than adults in the way they adapt themselves to new linguistic environments. This may be one of the reasons that some parents want their children to start learning English in early childhood. There seems to be a common illusion that children are more likely to become fluent speakers of English if native English speakers surround them since early childhood. However, there is a pitfall in such an idea. Even if children can speak fluent English in a country where English is not spoken as a common language or an official language, what benefits do they have in non-English society? The recent popular trend of "teaching English only in English" is said to have come from parents' potentially misguided belief that their children can only master English if immersed in English speaking environments.

Keeping these things in mind, I would like you to look at the result of my questionnaire.¹ I conducted the questionnaire in my English classes. I have

the impression that many students want teachers to speak Japanese as a means of instructing the class, though an equal number of students want teachers to teach English by speaking mostly in English.² Even if teachers speak simple English as a means of instruction, students have a negative posture toward such a teaching method. Some students point out that they might miss some important message if teachers speak only English in class.³ It is important for them not to misunderstand teachers' instruction about term papers, exams, or home assignments. In other words, teaching in English would be in vain if students misunderstand their teachers' instructions.

I once told students that keeping their attention span as they listen to their teachers' instruction is the main purpose of teaching in English; and that students' sincere efforts to understand teachers' instruction go a long way to improving their language skills. However, it is true that even a small misunderstanding may lead to a crucial mistake; how can they tell "turn left" from "turn to the left (which means circling themselves around)." Some students once asked me why Japanese teachers speak English in such a monolingual society. It seems that there is still a strong sense of opposition toward the use of English in the classroom even though English has become a major international language.

If I am allowed to carry the owls to Athens, I would like to refer to an old argument to do with whether the government of Japan should make English an official second language. Some scholars, journalists and politicians argued at that time that the competency of English would absolutely improve a lot if the government made English an official language. However, such a proposal was sneered down, because having English as an official language was seen as being a pipe dream. Many Japanese share the common view that Japan has become an economic giant because they could make themselves understood in their monolingual environment all over Japan. Many Japanese worry that economic efficiency would be lost if they communicate with each other in English. The service in governmental offices, hospitals, police stations, post offices, etc. would become inefficient.

In other words, ordinary people would have a hard time receiving a good service from these organizations. If people spoke several languages as in Singapore or Hong Kong, they might seriously think about an official second language. However, we Japanese unanimously agree that Japanese is a common language in the society of Japan. Therefore, there is no strong reason to use English as a means of communication in public places, not to mention in schools.⁴ Students as well as adults probably become hesitant to express their ideas in English, because they don't want to lose face in front of others. Some students might think that standing out amongst their classmates by speaking English is not a good idea in the classroom, because as the proverb goes, "Tall trees catch much wind."

It can also be said that a reason why students don't speak English in their tasks is that they are almost all adult learners. One can imagine that they want to have a fruitful talk or discussion before achieving their task, instead of 'baby-talking' in English. Their native tongue, Japanese, is the stable means of exchanging information and ideas efficiently. The amount of information and ideas Japanese students can transmit to others in English is very limited; so many students are liable to take the easiest way to communicate with others. In addition to this, most of them are not bilingual in the true sense of the word; they don't have equal talents for both languages, though they have been studying English for least, if not more than, six years. It is natural to say that the mother tongue is superior to the other tongue. So they don't dare to take a risk by speaking English in their task. However; how can teachers let students speak English in classroom?

I personally found a case in which Asian students (including Japanese students) who study English in the U.S. work very seriously for their task only in English. It seemed that they were trying to orient themselves to American communication styles. They were very positive in the way they exchange ideas even in broken English without feeling shy. It is obvious that they have to speak English in order to survive in American society. If they go out of the classroom, they still have to speak English to communicate with others.

If we Japanese teachers can create an "English only" situation (at least in Japanese schools), students will make much efforts to do their task solely in English. However there is the slight worry that none of them speak English once they leave the classroom. This is the reason that students can't maintain any motivations to speak English in public places. The linguistic environment in Japan is very different to the one in Hong Kong or Singapore. Bearing this in mind, I don't think it is an excellent idea that teachers create some kind of artificial linguistic environment in which students have to speak only English to do their task.

As for the identity issue (refer to question number 9 in the questionnaire), we don't need to worry about any loss of ethnic identity even if teachers conduct English classes only in English, because many students negate such an idea.⁵

The point is that many students want to have the chance to speak English, however they worry if they misunderstand teachers' instructions in classroom. This is a big reason that many students have a strong opposition to the method of "English only." There is no denying the fact that the number of students who want to brush up their speaking skill has been increasing in the past decade. However, teachers of English should not overlook the percentage of question number 14. There are still many students who don't want teachers to use English as a means of instruction in class. Teachers are expected to use a moderate amount of Japanese when conducting their English class.⁶ It is also necessary for teachers to ease learners' fears of hearing and speaking English in the classroom.

(The content of this paper is based on what I presented at a conference in Singapore at the end of April in 2006)

Notes

1. See pages 66 – 67 for my questionnaire
2. Refer to question number 2 in the questionnaire
3. Refer to question number 10 in the questionnaire
4. Refer to question number 13 in the questionnaire

5. Refer to question number 9 in the questionnaire
6. Refer to question number 12 in the questionnaire

Questionnaire

Respond to the following statements using one of the following responses; "deeply think so", "somewhat think so", "do not much think so", and "do not think so at all". (107 students answered the following questions.)

1. If you have English classes only in English, you become very proficient in English.
deeply think so-38 somewhat think so-61 do not much think so-8
do not think so at all-0
2. I don't care if foreign teachers conduct English classes only in English.
deeply think so-14 somewhat think so-40 do not much think
so-43 do not think so at all-10
3. If you want to be able to speak English, you had better go to language schools on the street.
deeply think so-11 somewhat think so-39 do not much think
so-53 do not think so at all-4
4. Japanese in general can't speak fluent English because the curricula in schools are not appropriate to improve our English skills.
deeply think so-10 somewhat think so-34 do not much think
so-54 do not think so at all-9
5. It is reasonable for students only to study reading and writing in schools, because speaking skills of each student differ a lot from one student to another.
deeply think so-1 somewhat think so-9 do not much think so-72
do not think so at all-25
6. 'Communication skill' means that one can speak fluent English.
deeply think so-11 somewhat think so-39 do not much think
so-40 do not think so at all-17

7. The ability to convey one's message by playing some music or by dancing is also a part of a person's communication skill.
 deeply think so-46 somewhat think so-49 do not much think so-12 do not think so at all-0
8. Teachers should increase the chance of student's speaking English in classroom as much as they can to improve students' speaking skills.
 deeply think so-30 somewhat think so-60 do not much think so-17 do not think so at all-0
9. If teachers have their English class only in English, students' ethnic identity would be Anglo-Saxonized.
 deeply think so-0 somewhat think so-6 do not much think so-53 do not think so at all-48
10. Teachers should refrain from speaking English in class, because students can't understand teachers' instructions and explanations.
 deeply think so-14 somewhat think so-52 do not much think so-34 do not think so at all-7
11. Japanese teachers of English should conduct their class only in Japanese, because their English pronunciation is highly accented.
 deeply think so-3 somewhat think so-16 do not much think so-68 do not think so at all-20
12. Teachers should conduct English class with a moderate use of Japanese.
 deeply think so-57 somewhat think so-39 do not much think so-10 do not think so at all-1
13. Special subjects as well as liberal subjects should be taught in English.
 deeply think so-3 somewhat think so-24 do not much think so-50 do not think so at all-30
14. I don't want teachers to speak English in class.
 deeply think so-9 somewhat think so-42 do not much think so-39 do not think so at all-17