【Articles】

Cognition or Context: How Do Teachers Approach Japanese University Speaking Classes?

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Abstract

This interview-based study aims to provide some insight into how speaking is taught in Japanese universities, which is an under-researched and perhaps even mysterious field given the autonomy that teachers are often afforded in such classes. Two native speaker and two non-native speaker teachers of English (from the same private university in Tokyo) were interviewed for the study. They were asked what approaches they have to teaching speaking and what factors have influenced these approaches. Although differences emerged regarding attitudes to pedagogical theory, feedback, and tolerance of L1 use in the classroom, all four participants appeared committed to teaching speaking in a student-centered way, with fluency prioritized over formal accuracy. Furthermore, a combination of their own previous educational and teaching experiences, as well as contextual constraints and institutional requirements (in addition to internal factors such as age and personality) have been the biggest influences on how they approach teaching speaking classes at the university level.

Keywords: speaking, teacher cognition, teaching context

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, a good deal of research has been done into teacher cognition, which has been defined as "what language teachers think, know, believe, and do" (Borg, 2003). It is widely acknowledged that this cognition is shaped by some combination of internal (cognitive) and external (environmental) factors. Further, it influences teachers' techniques and classroom behaviors, which has obvious repercussions for students and their learning outcomes. Teacher-based research is, therefore, an important area of investigation and forms an integral part of the attempt to understand how languages are learned in the classroom.

I have spent the vast majority of my teaching career working in Japanese universities and have developed a curiosity about the inner workings of this learning environment. Ironically, given its inherently social nature, teaching can feel like an individual enterprise, especially when teachers are given as much autonomy as is often the case in the university system. This interview-based study aims to shed some light on this teaching context and, especially, how it relates to the development of speaking skills.

Literature Review

The Japanese Context

Since its institutional beginnings in the nineteenth century, formal English teaching in Japan has been dominated by *yakudoku,* or the grammar-translation method. However, since the 1980s The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has promoted more communicative methodologies, albeit with questionable levels of success. Many high school teachers continue to teach grammar according to the way they themselves learned, reinforced by a system that has promoted grammar-based instruction for decades (Nishimuro & Borg, 2013). Even high school teachers with positive views about communicative language teaching (CLT) find themselves compromised by the reality of preparing students for university entrance exams (Nishino, 2012). So pervasive is the influence of these exams that some students are even reluctant to develop their speaking skills, perceiving them as unrelated to their chances of success (Sakui, 2004). Things could be about to change in this regard, however, as the government plans to incorporate a speaking element into university entrance exams.

Nevertheless, at present most freshman university students are likely to have a passive knowledge of at least basic vocabulary and grammar, and often far more extensive than that. Therefore, regarding university speaking classes, the main issue for many practitioners has been how to utilize the English that students already know. In other words, the goal is for students to become active users, rather than receptive learners, of language (Wiltshier & Helgesen, 2019).

With no further high stakes testing involved, universities are free to devise their own English curricula to achieve this goal. This system leads to more flexibility in the way English is taught, which translates to greater autonomy for teachers. Given that the majority of students are likely to be unfamiliar with predominantly English-speaking environments, a particularly salient issue is that of attitudes to L1 use in the classroom. A variety of approaches to this issue have been reported in the Japanese university context. For example, Ford (2009) found that native-speaker teachers varied in their tolerance of student L1 use, based on practical considerations and individual beliefs rather than institutional demands. Even if an institution

does have an English-only rule, some teachers interpret it more strictly than others depending on their own beliefs and experiences (Saito, 2014).

Influences on Teacher Cognition

A variety of factors influence teacher cognition and the way it manifests itself in classroom practice. Based on recurrent themes in the literature, Borg (2003) identified four major influences: previous language-learning experience; teacher training and education; teaching practice and experience; and contextual factors. Let us examine each factor in turn.

Prior language-learning experience can have either a positive or a negative influence on teacher cognition. For example, Numrich (1996) found that over a quarter of novice teachers wanted to include a cultural component into their lessons because they had enjoyed learning about L2 culture in their own lessons. Several teachers in the same study reported a desire to avoid error correction due to their own negative experiences as learners. Moodie and Feryok (2015), in their study of Korean primary school teachers, suggested that an early commitment to language learning contributes to an increased commitment to language teaching, both in terms of professional development and English proficiency. The authors drew a parallel between the persistence needed to learn a language with the persistence needed to continually improve one's own teaching.

Although formative learning experiences can prove stubbornly resistant to change, teacher education and training can modify the influence of these experiences. For instance, Peacock (2001), in a longitudinal study, found that third-year trainee teachers were far less likely than first-year trainees to view language learning as primarily a case of learning grammar rules. They were also less likely to relate successful L2 learning to general intelligence. Furthermore, even if training and education does not lead to substantial changes in outlook it can help more experienced teachers consolidate and articulate their beliefs (Borg, 2011).

Experience gained through teaching is also likely to influence the attitudes and beliefs of practitioners. Moreover, beliefs formed through such experience are more likely to be reflected in practice, as they are more closely related to the reality of the classroom (Basturkmen, 2012). In other words, a reflexive relationship exists between practice and principles, and indeed there is evidence that teaching behaviors can change over time. For example, Richards (1998) found that experienced teachers improvised more than inexperienced teachers, suggesting that flexibility and the ability to deviate from lesson plans develops gradually.

It should be emphasized, however, that stated principles and observed practice do not always correspond. In fact, Basturkmen (2012), in a review of research into this issue, claimed that there is no more than a limited connection between the two. A stronger relationship has

been found between principles and practice among more experienced teachers, however, as teaching beliefs become embedded over time and are therefore applied more consistently (Breen et al., 2001).

One reason that changes in teacher cognition do not always result in behavioral change is that contextual factors can place limitations on practice. The demands of parents and administrators, as well as the availability of resources, can all hinder the ability of language teachers to utilize techniques and activities that reflect their beliefs. For example, Kurihara and Samimy (2007) reported that Japanese teachers who had been trained in the U.S. felt constrained by everything from exam requirements and class sizes to students' expectations and opposition from colleagues, when trying to implement communicative methods at home. The need for more class hours and smaller class sizes is a common complaint among teachers who feel unable to implement CLT within the Japanese school system (Nishino, 2008), although it has been claimed that some teachers who blame external constraints are simply afraid of abandoning their traditional teaching style (Kurihara & Samimy, 2007).

Although the greater autonomy afforded in the university context means that teachers often face fewer obstacles, unfamiliar methodologies might be resisted by some students. For example, creative activities requiring active participation might not be valued, given how much they differ from the all-too serious business of passing entrance exams (Fujimoto, 2019). Moreover, communicating directly in an L2 is known to be a face-threatening activity, which is likely to cause anxiety among students unfamiliar with English-speaking environments. Patience and persistence are therefore required when attempting to implement pedagogical principles, even in the absence of administrative constraints.

Another explanation for the apparent mismatch between stated beliefs and observed practice is the tension between core and peripheral beliefs; the former being applied consistently across situations while the latter are applied more flexibly (Breen et al., 2001). When the two conflict, therefore, core beliefs tend to win out as they have become deeply ingrained through experience, while peripheral beliefs, even if theoretically-based, are not usually held with the same level of conviction (Phipps & Borg, 2009). For instance, teachers who have been trained to use communicative methods might revert to a more teacher-centered approach if, fundamentally, they believe that teachers should dominate classroom interaction.

Purposes and Research Questions

Overall, the literature supports Borg's (2015) view that language teaching is a set of "dynamic interactions among cognition, context, and experience" (p. 275). Narrowing the focus to Japan, English teaching within the Japanese university system has been under-researched, apart from

the issue of L1 use in the classroom mentioned earlier. Given that it represents the apex of the formal education system it surely deserves greater attention.

The majority of teacher cognition studies to date have focused on structural aspects such as the teaching of grammar and literacy, but I would like to investigate how it relates to the way speaking is taught in general. Traditionally, a lot of flexibility has been afforded in university communication classes, so there is a good deal of opportunity for teachers to conduct them according to their own pedagogical conceptions.

It would be of additional benefit to observe how teacher cognition is manifested in classroom practice, and ultimately how it relates to learning outcomes (as called for by Borg, 2003), although that is beyond the scope of the current study. Data collection has, therefore, been limited to teacher interviews.

The research questions are:

1. What approaches do English teachers have to teaching speaking in a Japanese university?
2. What factors influence these approaches?

Methodology

This study belongs within the constructivist paradigm, which prioritizes the perspective of the individual (Hatch, 2002). Although university teachers of English share similarities in terms of their responsibilities, they have different language learning, teacher training, and practical teaching experiences. When these diverse experiences are combined with factors such as personality and cultural background, pedagogical priorities and practices will inevitably vary. By conducting one-to-one interviews, I have attempted to relate each participant's background to their beliefs about teaching and their conceptualization of the teacher's role in a speaking class.

Context and Participants

The number of participants was limited to four, all from the same private university in Tokyo. All participants had between six and twelve years' experience teaching in Japanese universities, having previously taught in other contexts. My aim when recruiting participants was to represent as many different elements of the English teaching population as possible within this institution. This form of sampling is known as maximum variation sampling, in which participants are identified according to specific attributes designated by the researcher (Roulston, 2010).

Although all participants were within the same age range, two were male (one American, one British), and two were female (one Japanese, one Chinese). As well as the two native speakers of English being from different countries, I wanted the non-native speakers to represent both

Japan and a different country. My intention was to investigate what commonalities, as well as differences, exist in their approaches to teaching. I then tried to analyze these features through the lens of their cultural background and previous learning and teaching experiences.

Data Collection

One formal interview was scheduled with each participant, limited to between 30 and 40 minutes each. There were no linguistic difficulties as both of the non-native English teachers spoke English fluently. The interviews were semi-structured, therefore I had a number of open-ended questions prepared and the participants were encouraged to give full and expansive answers. These answers were then followed up with probes for further detail and explanation when necessary (Roulston, 2010). Although I tried to relate each interview question to the research questions, I also tried to avoid framing them in technical language so that they were clear and easy to answer. The interview questions are presented below, along with the relevant research question.

Background Questions

- How long have you been teaching English? How long in Japanese universities?
- How and why did you train as an English teacher?
- What is your experience as a language learner?

Research Question One (What approaches do English teachers have to teaching speaking in a Japanese university?)

1. Describe what you do in your speaking classes.
2. What do you think makes a good speaking class?
3. Which is more important in a speaking class, accuracy or fluency?
4. What is the role of the teacher and students in a speaking class?
5. How would you describe your relationship with your students in these classes?
6. How would you describe your teacher talk in these classes?
7. What is your view regarding L1 use in these classes?

Research Question Two (What factors influence these approaches?)

8. How, if at all, have your experiences of language learning influenced the way you teach speaking classes?
9. How, if at all, have your experiences of teacher training and education influenced the way you teach speaking classes?
10. How, if at all, have you changed your approach to teaching speaking classes since you began teaching?
11. What do you feel are the pros and cons of teaching speaking within a unified curriculum?

Transcription and Analysis

As the interviews were relatively short, I transcribed them in full. I did not adopt conversation analysis levels of detail as I was not concerned with the co-construction of talk during the interviews. However, I did include paralinguistic features such as laughter to portray the mood of the participants when I felt it was significant. This kind of non-verbal information brings an interview to life on the page and allows the reader to understand how the participants felt, which is an important aspect of the analysis.

After transcription, I conducted a thematic analysis of the data, which entailed sorting the data into categories based on topics raised during the interviews. This process was conducted inductively (i.e., without reference to a priori predictions and hypotheses) to allow the flexibility to consider topics initiated by the participants as well as the researcher (Roulston, 2010). Nevertheless, the interview questions were designed in such a way as to elicit comments relevant to the research questions and interviewee comments were coded accordingly. Topics therefore included practical and theoretical aspects of the participants' teaching approaches, as well as the factors that have influenced them, such as their own language learning and teaching experience. Codes or labels were not prepared in advance, in order to allow themes to emerge from the data.

Positionality

Ethical considerations were minimized in this study as there was no status difference between myself and the participants. At the time, we were all teachers in the same department of the same university and roughly within the same age bracket. All four participants were known to me in a professional capacity, which made gaining access straightforward. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality.

Nevertheless, there are potential drawbacks to this kind of research context. First of all, there is a danger that familiarity with the participants could make it difficult to maintain objectivity, although I had never seen any of them teach and had not discussed their approach to teaching communication classes prior to the study. I was also conscious of the need to be well-prepared and to maintain focus during the interviews, just as would be the case for participants with whom I had no prior contact or relationship.

A further issue is how the participants oriented themselves to me as a researcher. For example, if they had sensed that I favor a particular approach to teaching speaking this could have influenced how they responded to my questions. In addition, although there was no status differential, as professional colleagues they might still have been inclined to overemphasize the pedagogical or theoretical framework behind their approach.

Results and Findings

Approaches to Teaching Speaking

　　Several themes emerged from the interview data regarding overall approaches to teaching speaking. One thing that came across strongly was that all four participants favor a student-centered classroom, in which the teacher keeps a low profile during communication activities. According to Xia,

　　　I think if it's a good speaking class, usually I feel lonely (laughs). I feel lonely means all my students are talking, so they are really enjoying their conversation and they ignore me. I mean I'm just standing there and watching them speaking and, because I'm the teacher, I cannot join them because my job is just watching and organize and give some advice if necessary.

It is significant that Xia even feels she "cannot join" her students, as if she is compelled to take a back seat. Similarly, Rika stated that "I consider myself as a facilitator, because I don't want to be like 'a teacher' because students are the main part. So I just help them when they need help". The fact that she doesn't want to be like 'a teacher' suggests that she is rejecting the traditional role of the educator that she was familiar with in her own schooldays. Tom, referring to the teacher's role as "the guide on the side", also stated that "you definitely don't want the teacher to be the central focus of a communication or speaking class". Richard was less specific about this issue, but mentioned that he allows students to choose some of the topics to be discussed.

　　Another area of agreement was that fluency should be prioritized over accuracy in speaking classes. According to Richard, "In those kind of discussion classes... the communication is much more important, I think, than accuracy." Tom added, "ideally you have them focused on meaningful interaction and to minimize their concerns about formal accuracy." Rika and Xia agreed, with the latter relating a speaking class to the entertainment industry: "When people are talking it's like kind of showbusiness, and if the student can speak really fluently, it shows their confidence."

　　The previous comments hint at one area of difference among the participants; that is, a greater tendency to evoke linguistic theory among the native-speaker teachers. Tom referred to theory most explicitly: "My approach is based on the hierarchy of willingness to communicate pyramid... If you want them to speak, you have to establish willingness to communicate so I approach the class from the bottom up, establishing rapport with each other". Richard also highlighted theory, albeit positioning himself in opposition to a purely "communicative approach", which he said was popular when he began his career. Rika and Xia, in contrast, did not directly mention theory and were less clear overall about their approaches. For example, Xia stated, "I

think for the past year here, because of the discussion program, I do speak less than before, but I'm not quite sure if it's my own approach or whether it's because of the discussion program."

There were also differences in terms of approaches to giving feedback. Richard seemed to prioritize feedback most clearly, stating, "I think it's a big part of the lesson. We'll focus on things they used well and we'll focus on my suggestions. But there will be some grammatical points as well, and vocabulary." Tom mentioned that in a previous course he would have liked to provide more feedback regarding intercultural issues, but felt obliged to base his feedback on that course's fixed method of assessment: "We were really handcuffed in terms of the amount and quality of the feedback we were giving because of the assessment that we were required to use." This issue seemed less of a priority to Xia and Rika, with the latter commenting, "I sometimes give verbal feedback right away when it's necessary, but not much."

A final theme that emerged was that of attitudes to L1 use in the classroom. Tom was the most positive, commenting that "I am probably more lenient than most teachers about L1 use… especially with lower proficiency classes, I want them to meta-reflect about language targets and what's going on in the class to make sure everybody understands." Rika, too, was quite tolerant of L1 use: "I think it's okay. Students think it's okay because they want to make sure [of] some important information in Japanese, and I think it's alright." Richard also indicated acceptance in limited situations: "It depends what the point is… if it's just for checking understanding quickly amongst themselves, I don't really have a problem with it at all." Xia conveyed the strictest attitude of the four, although again it was mainly due to contextual factors: "At the first university I was teaching it's not [that] I was very strict, it's the school was very strict. No Japanese in class, even during the break!" The discrepancies in attitude to L1 use are not surprising, however, given the variation among university teachers in Japan identified by Ford (2009) and Saito (2014).

Factors Influencing these Approaches

Having established the participants' approaches to teaching speaking, let us now examine the factors that have influenced these approaches, using Borg's (2003) model of teacher cognition. Language learning experiences were referenced most directly by Xia, who mentioned having students read aloud in class, which was a technique she had used herself when learning English in China. Rika also brought up her own schooling, although more negatively, saying that she was given very few opportunities to actually speak and that "It was just like a school for translation. Teachers taught me how to translate English into Japanese every single day (laughs)!" Richard and Tom were less specific about their own experiences of school, although Tom stated, "I think it's vitally important for a language teacher to be a language learner. I think if you're

no longer a language learner you're going to lose touch with what it's like from a student's perspective." He then talked about the benefits of taking Japanese discussion lessons while employed as an English teacher. This comment resonates with Moodie and Feryok's (2015) suggestion that a commitment to language learning is linked to a commitment to language teaching and professional development.

Teacher training and education also seemed to have had a major impact on the non-native speaker participants. In particular, Rika was very positive about her experiences in the United States when studying for her Master's degree, and cited the pair and group work activities that she was exposed to there: "I think definitely these ways are something I learned in the U.S., not in Japan. In Japanese school, when I was a student, I almost never experienced that." Xia also mentioned some positive advice she was given when training to be a high school teacher in Japan: "I still remember the teachers at that high school told me 'You talk too much!' (laughs)... so that's why I always remind myself to talk less in class." Tom and Richard, on the other hand, were already experienced teachers before undergoing formal training. However, even experienced teachers can benefit from such training, as it can help to consolidate what they have learned in the classroom (Borg, 2011). Tom appeared to support this point when talking about his Master's program: "I think if you go out and try and do it and make your mistakes, and then get feedback and the theoretical grounding about why this works the way it works... it made sense to me."

All four participants were very clear about the impact of teaching experience. Xia cited the influence of her current teaching context, as well as her training, in her efforts to reduce her teacher talking-time. Tom appeared to learn a similar lesson through experience: "Initially, it's just so hard to get out of the way. It's so hard to stop talking. You're afraid of silence..." Richard mentioned his move away from pure CLT and towards a more skills and function-based approach to teaching, while Rika stated that she has become less strict as a teacher over time: "I changed a lot! When I started, I didn't know anything so I was very strict... I kind of regret (laughs). But now I'm not - as long as students enjoy learning it's okay." As experienced teachers, their principles and beliefs are likely to evolve more slowly from now on, as they become more consistent and entrenched over time (Breen et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, all beliefs and principles, whether entrenched through experience or not, are potentially subject to institutional demands and contextual constraints. Tom, for instance, expressed his frustrations about not being able to give the kind of feedback he wanted: "I felt restricted constantly. I felt an obligation to teach the class the way that they wanted it taught." Xia mentioned the strict English only policy at a previous workplace, but she also spoke positively about reducing her teacher-talk due to the requirements of the discussion course she

was currently teaching. In addition, all participants referred to the restrictions, but also the practical benefits, of teaching according to a unified curriculum. There are many references in the literature to the drawbacks and frustrations caused by such constraints (e.g., Kurihara & Samimy, 2007; Nishino, 2008) but the comments from this study's participants offer a reminder that institutional requirements are not always perceived negatively.

Discussion

Having analyzed the data in terms of emerging themes, what patterns or commonalities can be observed among teaching approaches? Most strikingly, all four participants appeared committed to teaching speaking in a student-centered way, with fluency prioritized over formal accuracy. This finding is good news for those who despair at the enduring legacy of the grammar-translation or *yakudoku* method in Japan as teachers of all backgrounds, at least in this institution, seem to recognize the importance of meaning-focused output (Nation, 2007). It is interesting that Rika has broken the cycle of teacher-fronted lessons which she was exposed to at school in Japan. It might, however, be instructive that it was her experiences in the United States that enabled her to do so.

On the other hand, differences emerged regarding the extent to which these approaches were based on theoretical considerations. While both of the native-speaker teachers referred to theory, whether positively (regarding willingness to communicate) or negatively (regarding pure CLT), neither of the non-native-speaker teachers made any reference to pedagogical literature. This finding also mirrors the differing attitudes to feedback, with both of the native-speaker teachers seemingly more meticulous in their desire to have students reflect on activities. There were also differences regarding attitudes to L1 use, although most participants expressed tolerance towards it for the purposes of confirming or checking understanding.

The major influence on the participants' approaches to teaching speaking seems to have been practical experience, with all four reporting major changes in approach since they began teaching. Richard has become more focused on teaching skills, through presenting and analyzing functional language, rather than simply expecting students to learn by talking. Rika has become less strict, although she partly attributed this change simply to getting older and feeling less need to maintain a distance between herself and her students. Both Tom and Xia have learned to reduce their talk-time in class, even though Xia admitted she has a naturally talkative character. However, the influence of age and personality factors makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the effect of teaching experience alone.

All participants mentioned the effect of language learning and teacher training, although these experiences seem to have been more formative for the non-native-speaker teachers. As

well as Rika's study in the United States, Xia mentioned techniques from her language classes in China and her training in Japan that she was still trying to employ. In contrast, the fact that both Tom and Richard had been teaching for a number of years before becoming qualified seems to have reduced the impact of that training, further highlighting the significance of practical teaching experience. Contextual factors are also relevant, as all participants mentioned the need to adhere to the demands of particular institutions or programs in which they have taught.

Conclusion

It is clear from this study that a combination of education, experience, and contextual factors, as well as internal factors such as age and personality, are responsible for the development of teacher cognition. Although these elements are dynamic and inter-connected, the result in this institution is that, regardless of background, teachers appear committed to maximizing student talking-time and fluency development. It is to be hoped that this trend exists among other universities too, given the pervasive focus on formal grammar and vocabulary study prior to university in Japan.

I hope that this study contributes to what is known about how speaking is taught in general, and especially at universities in Japan, both of which have been under-researched areas to date. Although I was unable to do so in this study, it would also be beneficial to compare stated principles and approaches to teaching with actual teaching practice (via classroom observations) and to relate both to learning outcomes.

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