

Advantages of using interactive English teaching methods in Japanese mainstream English classrooms

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Abstract

In Japan, the government and society as a whole is becoming more aware of the necessity to communicate with international markets using English (Neely, 2012). As a result, teaching methods within mainstream education are being reviewed and a push for more interactive based teaching methods has increased. The realization that the average English communicative ability in Japan has been comparatively weak (TOEIC Official Data Analysis, 2006) despite learners receiving a minimum of six years of compulsory English classes, has put current teaching pedagogies under fire as they must be considered as a major factor.

Teaching methods that are interactive, oral and action based put the learner into a pseudo-real communicative situation, help not only the acquisition of English communicative abilities but also increase intrinsic motivation for learning. This paper discusses the primary teaching method prevalent in Japan and contrasts this with recently introduced, interactive methods. It supports the position that these interactive methods are of more benefit to the English learner and the position is backed up with three examples of classroom lesson plans where the advantages of using one or more of these interactive methods can be clearly understood.

Keywords: English, Japan, education, interactive, learning, teaching, Japan, advantages

Overview

The Grammar Translation Method (GTM) has been used as the main method of English teaching in Japanese mainstream education (Law, 1995). The need for a shift to more interactive approaches has been deemed necessary if Japan is to increase general competency in English oral communication and thus compete in an ever-increasing global market (Tsukamoto & Tsujioka, 2013). Among the various interactive approaches, prominent ones such as Total Physical Response (TPR), Natural Approach (NA) and the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), along with their respective research data and advantages need

to be discussed, trialed and evaluated in the hope of creating a more interactive learning environment (Brown, 2007; Cook, 2008).

This paper is comprised of five parts. Part 1 provides a brief introduction to the topic and gives an overview of the current situation while also detailing the problems facing the Japanese mainstream English learner and reasons for a change to a more interactive approach.

Part 2 discusses the past English learning environments and the main teaching method used in mainstream education throughout Japan today. Literature is reviewed and the effects and shortcomings of these past methods are stated.

Part 3 describes the current interactive approaches in detail and prior research on their effects and advantages over past methods is discussed.

Using three lesson plans, Part 4 helps visualize the learning environments which can be achieved when the English learning is taking place under these interactive approaches.

Part 5 delves into the spin-off benefits that may occur when the learning takes place in an interactive environment. These involve motivation and the ease of learning for younger language learners.

1. Introduction

Although most Japanese students attend compulsory mainstream English lessons for a minimum of six years, from junior high school through to high school, an attainment of fluency and sometimes even a basic competency in the spoken language is rare. Results showed that in 2004 Japan boasted the highest number of test examinees at 67% compared to other Asian countries (TOEIC Report on Test Takers Worldwide, 2004). Average test scores, however, indicated that Japan recorded the lowest average scores of all the eight categories, which included Europe, Africa, South America, and Asia. The listening and reading sections alone showed that the average scores from two neighboring Asian countries, China and Korea, far exceeded that of Japan

	Listening	Reading
China	293	256
Korea	289	252
Japan	255	199

(TOEIC Report on Test Takers Worldwide, 2004)

This report clearly points out that although many Japanese were motivated to take the test,

their results did not reflect their eagerness. Learning any second language is no easy task, but reasons for this difficulty in Japanese student's ability to orally communicate in English need to be addressed. If we assume that people are not inherently challenged in learning a second language, Nunan (1989) suggests that the problem of learning and speaking the language lies in the teaching methodologies. Japan has historically used the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) when teaching English in the mainstream education system. Research shows that this method does little to help oral communication in English (Ellis, 1991). At present the current Japanese Ministry of Education, in realization of this fact has started to make policy changes to try and remedy this problem. Therefore it is timely to explore the benefits of using certain interactive teaching approaches that appeal to the natural senses of the learner such as seeing, hearing, speaking and touching. These benefits will become clear with the help of three example lesson plans in part four. However, let us first look at past English teaching methodologies.

2. How has English been taught in Japan's mainstream education to date?

Not unlike many other countries, Japan and its policies for teaching foreign (non-Japanese) languages have changed over time, however somewhat conservatively. Japan has adopted a predominantly GTM approach to teaching English, since it reopened its ports to foreign trade in the late 1800's (Hadly, 1997). The GTM has been the main institutionalized method of teaching second languages and is still used in many Japanese mainstream institutions today.

The majority of junior high school and high school lessons are taught in the Japanese language primarily from a textbook, with little active use of English oral skills being taught. From the junior high school level, English is rote learned rather than acquired. In the past, this has been partly due to the school teacher's lack of English oral ability. Even aural learning was limited to students listening to a tape recorder. Therefore, little interactive communicative exercises were used while learning took on the form of mainly reading and writing. It has been only in recent years, that as part of global education, the Ministry of Education has realized the necessity of Japanese to be able orally communicate in English within an intercultural situation. Therefore, there has been a push for English oral communication to be taught in the mainstream education.

Firstly, the Japanese Ministry of Education started inviting Foreign English Teachers (FLT) to Japan's shores, in an attempt to help improve the fluency of spoken English. The

FLT comes to the school and teaches in a team teaching situation with a Japanese Teacher of English (JTE). This allows for a smooth flow of lessons and the chance for a huge variety of teaching styles to stimulate the students. There have also been many books, texts and teaching tools now published to include teaching plans and ideas for a FLT / JTE team teaching situation. FLT's in the past have been scarce with visits to an individual school lasting for usually a week to a month before having to visit another school. Recently, however, the board of education has increased it's hiring of FLT's to the point where some high schools and junior high schools are lucky enough to have a resident FLT for the whole academic year.

Another policy implementation by the Japanese Ministry of Education in 2002 was the *period of integrated study* starting at year 3 of Japanese Elementary Schools. Schools may individually choose to teach English as a foreign language, or choose to use English as a tool for cultural understanding. The main objective of this policy was to expose elementary children to English conversation activities at an early age (MEXT, 2002). This policy was born from the notion that if the teaching of English and intercultural understanding is taught at an earlier stage of cognitive development, then students may get a foot in the door to learning English before they move on to Junior High School.

3. What Interactive English Teaching Methodologies are available?

We have now discussed that the GTM has not helped English fluency or oral communication of Japanese learners in mainstream education. Also we can clearly see that through use of FLT's and through teaching English at the earlier level of Elementary Schools, the Japanese Ministry of Education is actively making policy changes in an attempt to increase the oral communicative ability of Japanese citizens. What interactive teaching methodologies can be used to aid in the attainment of English fluency?

Chomsky observes that all children acquire a first language automatically, just as a child starts walking without any guidance (Mitchell & Myles, 1988). First language acquisition and second language acquisition of course have their differences. However, acquiring a language is a primary ability for all human beings, so some of these learning methods do crossover to learning a second language (Pinker, 1994.) Let us look at three approaches, which have been used in first language study.

The Total Physical Response (TPR) method founded by Asher (Brown, 1977) is an

approach where the learners listen to the target language and then move, touch, observe and generally act out the language physically. Therefore, the learner learns in a free environment, as the focus is not on reproducing the language but on understanding it in context.

The Natural Approach (NA) devised by Krashen (cited in Brown, 1982, p.108) placed an emphasis on a stress free learning environment. Here participation is voluntary but involves small group work, games or skits that portray normal, everyday interpersonal situations. These situations may be at a restaurant, at school or going shopping and such like.

The third approach is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This approach concentrates on the learner's communication and speaking as much as possible. Like the NA, learners use the language in various situations where as long as meaning is conveyed via oral communication and gestures, then inaccuracies and grammatical mishaps can be overlooked (Brown, 2000). If these three approaches are used in a step phase process, the student should begin to learn the language first by listening to comprehensible input, and then start to try and produce the language themselves. Now, we must look at how we can create an environment where these approaches can be used effectively.

4. How can these interactive English teaching methodologies be used to aid fluency?

Put simply, to actively implement either or all of the TPR, NA and CLT methods, the teaching style and lesson has to appeal to the student's natural senses of seeing, hearing and touching. If this is adequately achieved, a desire from the student to voluntarily and actively participate in the learning experience should be elicited and thus make greater gains towards fluency. Therefore, educators must first plan lessons that work around these principles. The following three brief lesson plans, which I have used in classrooms previously, show how thinking of these methods when making lesson plans can result in an interactive learning experience within the classroom.

Lesson 1 **The UFO Catcher.** Elementary School Grade 5 (Year 5)

Approach : TPR and NA Teachers : FLT and JTE

Learning Objectives :

1. To acquire basic vocabulary of stationary items.

2. To become familiar with brief directional commands.

Greetings : FLT “Good morning everyone.”

(Try to elicit reply without JTE’s help first.)

FLT to JTE “How are you today?”

JTE “I’m hungry.”

Warm Up :

FLT shows the students an eraser. Tell the students that it is an ‘eraser’ and have the students repeat the pronunciation several times. Put the eraser on the desk in front of the teacher. Do the same for a pencil, ruler and pencil case. FLT then blindfolds the JTE and has the JTE stretch out a hand above the objects. The FLT then explains that he or she will guide the JTE’s hand like the mechanical arm of the ‘UFO catcher’ game that picks up toys at the amusement arcade. The JTE then asks a student which stationary item they would like the FLT to try and get. After deciding on the item, the JTE then proceeds to give the FLT commands such as, “Go straight, stop, go left, stop, go right, stop, go down, and pick up.” After this is done once, the commands are written on the blackboard and the activity is done again. (Some explanation of left and right should be used here. For example, outfielders in Japan’s most popular sport, baseball, are called ‘left’ and ‘right.’ Or put out your left and right hand in front of you, palms down. The hand which shows the index finger and thumb making an ‘L’ shape is the left hand.)

Group Work :

The teacher then asks the students to put out their own stationary on the desk and practice the exercise with a partner taking turns.

For Fun :

Ask for a volunteer to guide the FLT to an object. Put out normal stationary objects and also a ball of slime. If the teacher shows a disgusting face when handling the slime, the volunteer will probably try to guide the students hand to the slime. The FLT can put on a blindfold and the volunteer gives the commands. This can be done vice versa with the volunteer student

doing the task and the FLT (or another student volunteer) giving the commands.

Farewells : FLT and JTE say, "Thank you class for a great lesson! It was fun! See you next time!"

Notes : - If no one volunteers for the For Fun section, then the JTE can be used as the UFO catcher with the FLT giving commands.

- If there is only one teacher present, the teacher can choose a student as a volunteer or assistant using the teacher's discretion to which student would best be able to participate in the task.

-If so desired, the first stationary item chosen by a student for the JTE to guide the FLT, can be given as a present to the student.

-Also, for the final fun activity, the slime can be given as a present to the volunteer!!

Lesson 2 **The Messenger.** Junior High to High School levels.

Approach : TPR, NA and CLT Teachers : FLT and / or JTE

Learning Objective : 1. To remember sentences in order.

2. To orally retell a sentence.

3. To listen to and dictate a sentence.

4. To attempt to translate a sentence.

Greetings : FLT "Good afternoon everyone."

(Try to elicit reply without JET's help first.)

FLT to JTE / Student "How is the weather today?"

JTE / Student "It's sunny. It's a beautiful day!"

Warm Up :

FLT shows the students that he or she has a message written on a piece of paper. The message can be anything simple but if it is interesting to the students, they are more eager to participate in the following activity. For example, 'Your FLT teacher's nickname was Fat Matt at high school!' The JTE can ask, "What does the message say?" Or the JTE or FLT can ask

the students “Do you want to know what the message says?” The FLT then tells the message to the class. Students then try to work out what is the meaning of the message in their native language.

Activity :

The FLT explains that the class will play a game called ‘The Messenger’ and organizes all the students into groups of four by asking them to move their desks into four-desk groups. The FLT then gives each student of each group a number from 1-4 and gives each group a blank piece of paper and pencil. (If in one group there are less than four students, give one or two students two numbers and they will do the task twice.) The FLT then shows the students that he or she has other messages. The FLT then goes out of the classroom and pins a message outside the door in the corridor or outside in the garden, so that the students can see what the FLT is doing. Next, the FLT asks the ‘Number 1’ students to raise their hands. The FLT then shows by acting, while explaining, that the Number 1 students will go out of the class, remember the message and come back to the group and tell the message to the group. The rest of the group (3 students) is to write the message down correctly on the paper and try to translate it into their native tongue. The FLT tells the class that student Number 1 can go back and forth to the message multiple times if the student forgets or wants to recheck the message but will only have two minutes to complete the task. After the two minutes has passed, the FLT then changes the message to a second message and it is the Number 2 students turn to retrieve the message. They too, only have two minutes to complete the task. The process is then repeated for the Number 3 and 4 students.

Sharing :

When the task is finished. The FLT then asks various students from various groups what they have written for the various messages and what their translations were.

Farewells : FLT and / or JTE say, “Thank you class for a fun lesson! I hope you are not too tired! See you next time!”

Notes : -The difficulty of the message can be tapered to student’s school year or English ability.

Warm Up :

Play a game of 'Naughts and Crosses' on the blackboard with the JTE or student volunteer. After the game explain that lines running across the blackboards are 'Rows' and that the lines running up and down the blackboard are 'Columns'.

Activity :

The FLT explains that the class will play a game called 'Rows and Columns' and organizes the students so that their desks are in a grid form of straight lines and columns. (All Japanese classrooms are in this formation to begin with.) Next, the FLT explains that first he or she will choose one row to stand. The FLT will then ask a question or give a command (see examples are below.) If the FLT asks a question, the first student to put up their hand and answer correctly may sit down. If the FLT gives a command, the first student to perform the command may sit down. After a series of questions and commands there will only be one student left standing. Now the column of that student must stand. More questions and commands are given until yet again one student is remaining. Next the row of the remaining student must stand and so on. The more questions and commands that the FLT and / or JTE prepare, the longer the game can continue.

Examples of questions and commands.

Please touch the desk of the person on your right.

How many stars are there on the NZ flag?

Drink a cup of coffee. (Students perform the action.)

How many brothers does the FLT have?

Drive a car. (Students perform the action.)

How many students are in this room?

Become a samurai warrior. (Students perform the action.)

What is the colour of the JTE's necktie?

Eat some very hot noodles. (Students perform the action.)

What is the name of this school's principal?

Hit a home run. (Students perform the action.)

How many members are there in the singing group SMAP?

Teach the class English. (Students perform the action.)

Do you like Kentucky Fried Chicken?

Farewells : FLT and / or JTE say, "Thank you everyone for an awesome lesson. I laughed a lot! See you next time!"

Notes : -For equality, choose the first row by random. Using 'Eeny, meeny, miny, mo...' is good as the Japanese have their own version and the students enjoy hearing a different one in English.

-Try to find questions that interest the students, about popular rock bands, the up and coming baseball finals and so on.

-Try to alternate between questions that require answers in English and commands that require movement. In this way, those students who are too embarrassed or frightened to fully cooperate orally can still manage to sit down by reacting and acting physically such as the TPR approach suggests.

-If a student of lower ability tends to be left standing often, then use knowledge of that particular student so that they may be able to sit down earlier. For example, if the student is a member of the rugby club, when there are still 3 or so students standing, ask what number is the 'fullback' in rugby and so on. Therefore this lesson may be best used when the FLT and / or JTE are familiar with the students.

-If a student is not the first to perform an action but does the action very well or makes the other students laugh, they may be allowed to sit down as a reward.

-If the students are of a high ability, the FLT and / or JTE can take a student's place and that student can take the role of the person giving the question or command.

5. What are the possible benefits of an interactive learning environment?

Here, three basic lessons have shown that school classrooms can be used as interactive environments for the learning and attaining of English. By using lesson plans such as these, the student's fluency in the oral use of and understanding of spoken language will benefit in comparison to lessons based on a GTM approach. This is undoubtedly the most obvious benefit, that, students have the opportunity to listen and speak, the two most important ingredients of communication. Therefore classroom lessons that simulate real life scenarios prepare students to be already familiar with the language to be used when the real situation

arises. However, not just in the lesson itself, how can these interactive lessons induce other throw off benefits educationally for the students?

Firstly, student motivation is an important factor that needs to be considered when learning a second language. The success of an interactive lesson plan can depend to a large extent on student participation. Thus, students must be motivated and willing to participate in the activity for it to be to their advantage. This may be more difficult to achieve with teenage students as they tend to be much more self-conscious than younger children (Yule, 1996). However, voluntary participation can be achieved and can result in a rewarding experience for the student, provided teachers naturally and smoothly foster the student's participation. Whether it is through a sense of satisfaction or even the enjoyment of participating, student motivation is firstly enhanced extrinsically by the teacher and environment, which then triggers the student's intrinsic motivation or individual desire to actively participate in future English learning situations.

Thus, student's motivation and desire to learn in the future can be enhanced by a positive learning experience. This positive learning experience can be produced as a natural byproduct of and also as a fuel for student learning in an interactive environment, by simply having 'fun!' By having fun, students may actually be learning or attaining the language without even knowing it. This phenomenon is known as 'flow theory', (Egbert, 2003) which has shown that when students enter a zone of total engagement, learning increases exponentially. It is basic human nature that if something is fun, then, we want to do more of it, which in turn increases motivation. Hence learning and increased motivation become one and create a cycle where one drives the other. In the words of David Paul, "English lessons can be like one big game, children to stay focused on learning, seeing learning and fun as being two sides of the same coin, and I would like them to be successful." (Paul, 2003, p. 160)

Yet another benefit of using a more interactive approach in Japan is that compulsory education of English in Japan involves young students, from year 3 through to year 12. Past research tells us that it is naturally easier for younger students to learn the oral form of a second language as their minds are already set up to learning the oral form of their first language. (Lusting & Koester, 2006). If a student starts learning the oral form of a second language at an early age, it may not only be easier to learn than their older counterparts but also the language becomes more familiar, leading to a more positive attitude towards learning or

the language in the future. This positive attitude could also be enhanced due to interactive approaches, which concentrate on listening and speaking, as opposed to reading and writing.

Conclusions

Policy changes within mainstream education in Japan reflect recent views that there is a need for greater teaching of English communication in schools. If teaching plans are to reflect the main aims of the TPR, NA and CLT methodologies, then hands on activities that include listening, speaking and physical activity should be paramount, with an emphasis on fun to trigger and increase motivation. However, it is important to note that with entrance examinations for both school and universities set predominantly focused on GTM methods, teachers are somewhat restrained from spending class time on communication type activities when their students are hoping to score well on these tests. If these tests are not going to contain an oral element, then teaching approaches will change little as the teacher's main goal is to prepare the students for examination day. Therefore, if educators are hoping to make an impact on Japanese fluency, it may be at the elementary level where their biggest gains will be made. Young malleable minds, yearning for fun and knowledge can be targeted for the acquirement and familiarization of English through interactive lessons, planned just as much for enjoyment, as seeds towards an English-fluent Japan.

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