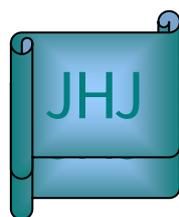


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**Encouraging students to take their language learning outside the classroom**

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This article looks at the issues involved in encouraging Japanese university students to adopt English as a second language in their everyday communication with other learners outside the classroom environment. It discusses the reservations students generally express along with suggestions of ways in which teachers might address their concerns. Finally, some guidelines are suggested for the introduction of an “English outside the Classroom” program within a Japanese university environment.

本稿は、日本の大学生に対し、教室を離れた日常生活でのコミュニケーションを活用した（第二言語としての）英語習得法に関する論文である。特に、その過程で生じる学生の気後れや懸念といった問題を指摘し、それに対する教員の対処方法に関しても論じている。そして最後に、日本の大学において「教室外での英語活用プログラム」を導入するためのガイドラインを提示している。

## **Introduction**

Researchers continue to look for answers to the question of why English learners in Japan often fail to achieve communicative competence in the language. Some might say, however, that there is no great mystery. Brown (2000) pointed out that “Few if any people achieve fluency in a foreign language solely within the confines of the classroom” (p.1). This notion is becoming more and more widely accepted as the profession focuses on developing autonomy in learners, but it seems that one important factor is often overlooked; a high level of speaking fluency can only come from extended speaking practice, and given that most of our students do not have regular contact with people from other countries, it follows that they will have to talk to each other. We may then reword Brown’s statement to read, “Few if any Japanese university students will achieve fluency in spoken English unless they practice speaking with other Japanese people outside the classroom.” I would suggest, however, that this is not something that generally receives a great deal of attention in English teaching in Japan. The reasons for this are probably related to the beliefs and attitudes held by both teachers and students; students do not accept that this kind of practice is beneficial, and many teachers do not feel it is a realistic goal to aim for.

### **The blind leading the blind?**

Many Japanese students see English interaction between non-native speakers as a case of the blind leading the blind, but this is clearly not a view shared by their teachers. Most native English-speaking teachers in Japan base their classes around pair and group work, and there are many good reasons for this (see Long and Porter, 1985). Few students, however, are able to make the jump in reasoning needed to recognize that if there is benefit in them talking to their friends in English in a classroom when the teacher is not listening, then a similar level of benefit should be derived from practicing when the teacher is not actually present.

## **Why are students reluctant to practice with other students?**

Many of the university students I am currently teaching are towards the lower end of the ability spectrum. Some have suggested that the idea of students using English outside the classroom is only feasible with high-level or highly motivated students. The motivation to try is clearly a given condition for the success of projects like this, but many of my most successful students have started out with nothing more than a bare minimum of English vocabulary. In order for students to want to try this kind of practice, however, they must first believe that there is some benefit in it. I have found that regardless of level or environment, most language students voice the same objections to the idea of speaking English to each other outside the classroom.

*1) We will just pick up each other's mistakes, and our English will get worse.*

One obvious response to this is 'so how come when you talk to me you do not 'pick up' my English? As to the issue of their English getting worse, Pica et al. (1996) found that "Learners, too, may be reassured that their participation in communication tasks with other learners is not linguistically harmful" (p.80). We should also remind students that we are promoting this kind of practice as a supplement to their classes, not as a replacement for them.

*2) Neither of us will know if we are right or wrong, so we can't correct each other.*

This is undeniably true, but the same could be said of most group work done in the classroom. Another point worth making to students is that even if they don't know whether their English is correct or not at the time, thinking about it and then checking later is a very effective way of learning new language.

*3) Because we are both Japanese, we will understand each other even if our English is completely wrong.*

There may indeed be situations where this happens, and this is one feature of peer

action that makes this kind of practice less than ideal. The point we should keep making to students, however, is that being less than ideal is not the same as being worthless.

- 4) *Our pronunciation will not improve because we can understand each other's "katakana" style.*

Pronunciation is a tricky area. Students in Japan often say that they want an American / British / Australian teacher because they want to learn a specific accent. In reality, of course, the accent most students end up with is Japanese, and this will be the case regardless of who they are talking to or practicing with. Once again, it is worth pointing out the other options that are available for working on pronunciation outside the classroom if this is a major concern for them.

- 5) *The only way to learn English is to study abroad.*

Most students hold a great many misconceptions about what it means to "study abroad". Tanaka (1997) in his study of Japanese students in New Zealand found that most had great difficulty in making native speaker friends. The reality of studying abroad for the vast majority of Japanese students is that most of their English practice and learning will take place with other non-native speakers of English, something in ample supply here in Japan.

- 6) *We don't know enough English -*

It is worth doing some exercises in class to show students just how far it is possible to communicate using nothing more than gestures with the odd English word thrown in. Convince them that the only way they are going to learn enough English is by trying to use what they already have.

### **Is it realistic to expect Japanese university students to use English outside the classroom?**

The idea of using an L2 in an L1 environment for the purposes of achieving fluency in the L2 is not without precedent. Students of French and German did it when I was in university, and natives of tourist destinations like Nepal and Bali will often practice English or Japanese among themselves so as to be in top form when they really need their language skills. I have also had a degree of success with introducing this concept into three Japanese universities, and some students have adopted English to the point where they say that with certain friends, speaking Japanese would now be “unnatural”. In general, I have found that if students feel that the teacher expects them to use English outside the classroom as an integral part of their course, it need not be seen as an unrealistic goal.

### **What are the benefits of peer interaction outside the class?**

The first major benefit is a reduction in anxiety when speaking English. Many students report that they panic when they have a chance to speak to someone from another country in English outside the classroom environment, causing any hope of performing at their true level to go out of the window. Those students of mine who have begun to mix English into their everyday lives say that they no longer feel such anxiety about using the language and are able to give a much better account of themselves when the opportunity arises. One student wrote in an assignment, “When I talk to foreign people, I don’t panic”. The second major change I have seen is a marked increase in fluency. Most students will tell you that they often know what they want to say, but that they can’t access the language quickly enough. Pinker (1997) makes the following point about memory: “An optimal information-retrieval system should be biased to fetch frequently and recently encountered items. Anderson notes that that is exactly what human memory retrieval does” (p.143). In other words, students’ ability to retrieve

English will increase with the frequency of their attempts to access it, and this should be true regardless of whom they are practicing with.

Finally, we should never underestimate the positive effects on motivation and attitude that come when learners begin to feel a degree of ‘ownership’ of a new language (see Norton, 1997). As English begins to take on a genuine role in their everyday lives, students are likely to change the way they feel about it, and probably also the way they approach their study of it.

### **Guidelines for introducing an ‘English outside the classroom’ program**

#### *1. Incorporate it into your course.*

One of the biggest problems for students is worrying about what others will think if they start speaking English outside the classroom. One possible way around this is to make it part of an assignment or homework, such as giving everyone a particular topic and a list of students they have to talk to about it outside the class. Students sign each other’s lists to show that they have completed the task. This gives them the option of saving face by saying “I have to do this for my class.”

#### *2. Use class time to help students prepare.*

Set aside class time to answer questions that students may have relating to what they practiced outside. When you give students an activity to do in pairs or groups that could be done without a desk, send them out of the classroom to do it so that they can begin to break the association between English practice and the classroom.

#### *3. Set up a club*

Japanese students do not like to be the only one to try something new. Set up an ‘all-English club’ so that students can meet others who are prepared to take up the challenge.

*4. Offer students a range of strategies and encourage them to experiment.*

Learners are all different. For example, some students may prefer to try to use English all day, and others may like to practice in ten, five, or one minute bursts. In the UK, the most effective anti-smoking slogan to date has been ‘never give up giving up’. Remind the students (and yourself!) that this is an ongoing effort, not a ‘one-off’ succeed or fail experiment.

*5. Set challenges*

If you approach this idea like a game, you can set one hour, one day, or even one-week ‘All-English Challenges’. Students who meet the challenge can have their names listed on a league table, receive prizes, or have their achievement recognized in any way you see appropriate.

*6. Hold an English camp*

“English camp” can be anything from a lunchtime picnic to a weekend away, but the key point is that English will be the only language of communication. Attendance should be voluntary, and everyone should be focused on some activity (such as cooking together) so that they are using language for real communication.

## **Conclusion**

If Brown’s statement about students not achieving fluency within the confines of the classroom is true, then this idea of adopting English as a second language outside the classroom within the L1 environment should not be an optional extra tagged on to our language programs, but rather a central tenet of our teaching philosophy. It is probably fair to say, however, that this is not the case at present. Speaking English with other Japanese learners outside the classroom may not be without its difficulties, but where the option of practicing with native speakers does not exist we need to do all we can to

persuade students that it really is the next best thing.

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