

Original Article

Establishing English Only Classrooms

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This paper discusses the value of English-only classrooms in Japanese universities. Most, if not all, teachers realize the benefits of conducting language lessons purely in the language being learned but find it easier to solve communication breakdowns in the class by using the students' first language. I believe that the learners will benefit from being involved in 'negotiation of meaning' with the teacher.

Key Words: negotiation of meaning, communication breakdown, authentic English, grammar development, motivation

"Language develops in response to the need to mean and to understand what others mean". (Halliday, 1975)

"I enjoyed the class because I can communicate with my friends in English". (Junior College student, 2006)

Introduction

First year college students in Japan have varying degrees of confidence in their ability to speak English. Undoubtedly the best way for students to develop their fluency and confidence in using the language is to communicate with each other, in English — as much as possible. As they have so little opportunity to use English in their everyday lives, it is essential to encourage them to use it as much as possible in the classroom.

Students are already aware that developing their English skills will enable them to talk with people

from many different backgrounds and countries but when faced with difficult classroom activities, it is much easier to negotiate with their classmates in Japanese, so they revert to their first language. The challenge for teachers is to establish a classroom atmosphere that will encourage students to communicate in English.

During the first semester in 2006 I taught two very different first year classes. The first group were low ability junior college students; the second were university students with high academic capability. Both groups were very enthusiastic about learning English and I conducted all classes only in English. At the end of the semester I gave them an evaluation form asking for their opinions of the lessons. I have used their feedback to personify this paper.

English-Only Classrooms

"I love free talking time, because it's very useful for me. It's fun and I can study English too". (Junior College student, 2006)

In an English-only classroom where students are participating in activities which require them to use

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new language, they are forced to think about the language they already know and how they can use it to get their meaning across. As a result they develop strategies that help them to communicate even though their language skills are limited. Learning these communication strategies is an essential part of language learning. "The more [students are exposed to English], the faster and easier it will be to assimilate the language". (Offner, 1997)

It takes time for learners to accept that there will always be instances of miscommunication. Teachers need to teach beginning students to be satisfied with getting their general meaning across. They can also support students as they learn how to cope with misunderstandings without losing confidence. "Learning a language is imaginative, creative and even artistic". (Offner, 1997)

Developing Grammar

"Because this class is all English my skills improved". (Junior College student, 2006)

Some teachers in Japan worry the present emphasis on communicative teaching ignores the need for grammar. But research has shown that if students are to achieve high levels of grammatical accuracy they need regular opportunities for 'meaningful use' of the language they have been taught. "Conversational interaction in L2 ... is considered the basis for development of L2 grammar". (Gass 1997)

For students to gain proficiency in communicating in English, they need regular opportunities to actively use the language. Practicing a grammar point is not part of language acquisition. Students learn by doing. Recycling, or using language again and again in a variety of ways in an English-only classroom, maximizes in class opportunities for learning.

Some students are concerned they will learn errors from other students. They think they need the teacher's input to ensure they learn 'correct' English. In 1985 a research study of adult learners found the students talked more with other learners than they did with native speakers. The researchers also found that the number and type of errors made by students stayed the same regardless of the

language proficiency of the person they were talking to. Intermediate level students made the same number of errors with advanced and native speakers as they did when they were talking with another intermediate student. (Long and Porter, 1985) Students were obviously more comfortable talking with their peers, and they were not adversely affected by the lower ability of their peers. They did not learn mistakes from the other students.

The Value of English-Only Classrooms

"I enjoy talking to classmates in English". (Junior College student, 2006)

"I can skill up and enjoy this class". (University student, 2006)

Enforcing English-only classrooms and immersing the students in English is more likely to create real, or authentic use of language because it forces them to interact and negotiate meaning in English. Giving learners opportunities to use their own English for real communication, rather than merely modifying a textbook example, stretches their language skills as they try to make themselves understood. They will experiment with language, rephrase what they have just said or maybe try new sentence structures that they have not used before. This negotiation of meaning is an essential part of language learning.

Communication is the main purpose of learning a language. The more attempts students make to communicate in English, the more likely it is that their risk-taking and hence confidence to use English will increase. Actual attempts to communicate are essential for developing proficiency. For students to communicate successfully they must have the ability to understand, and also to be understood. Classroom situations where they need to speak spontaneously without preparation, and therefore develop a willingness to make mistakes, will encourage confidence.

Real-World English

"Now I have some courage when I speak to someone in English". (University student, 2006)

Another advantage of English-only classrooms,

which immerse the students in English, is that they are more likely to resemble real-world environments because students are forced to interact and negotiate for meaning in English. Students quickly realize that English is the 'classroom' language. They are pushed to stretch their language skills and this will aid their language acquisition. In real life, students won't have anyone to help them out when they have problems communicating. They must learn strategies that enable them to negotiate meaning on their own without help from other students or the teacher.

To be successful learners, students need to use, not just comprehend, the new language. This means two important features of a successful language classroom are a) a language rich environment and b) genuine communication. I do not think this happens in classrooms that resort to using Japanese when there is a problem. "[Students] may learn directly from each other, or more likely, they will learn from the very act of attempting to articulate their own understanding". (Ellis 1986)

Successful language learning is more likely to occur in an English-only classroom where "learners come to regard use of the target language as a natural and regular occurrence. Learners will learn best in an environment where they are surrounded by a range and variety of spoken and written language". (Vale, Scarino and McKay 1991) Students are forced to mobilize all their linguistic resources when they are involved in natural language use, such as teachers asking authentic questions. An authentic question is one where the teacher doesn't already know the answer.

A successful conversation requires learners to understand what is said to them, and also to be understood when they speak. They need to learn how to negotiate meaning and make language comprehensible for both the speaker and the listener. This can only happen if the students are given many opportunities in the classroom to practice their listening and speaking skills.

Krashen's comprehensible input theory is well known. In the 1980s Long established that interaction is a necessary part of attaining comprehensible input. His research showed that "what learners need is not necessarily simplification of the linguistic forms but rather an opportunity to interact with other speakers, in ways which lead them to adapt

what they are saying until the learner shows signs of understanding". (Lightbown and Spada 1990) Modifications made while negotiating ways to solve a communication problem help to produce comprehensible input for the learner.

The Australian curriculum guidelines for foreign languages write about successful language acquisition:

Learners will learn how to use language purposefully only by being provided with a range and variety of opportunities to do so. They need to be encouraged to take risks as they generate language for themselves, and most importantly, from the very beginning they need to acquire strategies to compensate for the inevitable breakdowns in communication that will occur at all stages on their language learning.

Vale, Scarino and McKay (1991)

Communication Breakdown

"I like talking time very much. Sometimes I felt difficult about speaking English only but I enjoyed and it helped my speaking ability". (Junior College student, 2006)

Some students are of course tempted to resort to using their first language to solve communication problems. They know they can solve the problem more quickly and that the lesson will not be as difficult if they change to speaking Japanese. These students need lots of encouragement to experiment with negotiating meaning in English.

Learners who are not actively involved in communicative activities during lessons do not have opportunities for self-expression and are more likely to lack confidence in using the target language. "Part of the teacher's art is to create, or stimulate student creation of, the types of situations in which interaction naturally blossoms and in which students can use for actual communication what they have been learning in a more formal fashion". (Rivers, 1987)

Some students avoid taking risks in English class; some pretend that they have understood what was said to them, others might completely withdraw from a conversation. These students would benefit from being taught a range of simple phrases they

could use to interact with others in their group. Some useful phrases are:

- Who's going to begin?
- I'd like to start.
- Whose turn is it?
- I think we need to ask the teacher.
- What do you think?
- Do you agree?
- What does _____ mean?
- I don't agree.
- I have a question.

I often hear teachers say they resort to using Japanese in the classroom because "students can't understand communicative lessons". Students can learn a lot about communication strategies in an English-only classroom as they observe teachers role-modelling communication strategies such as:

- Paraphrasing and/or using gestures.
- Using plain or easy English that can be easily understood.

Designing English-Only Lessons

"I learnt the pleasure of communication in English". (University student, 2006)

Students often say learning is more enjoyable and thus more motivating if they are studying things that relate to their experiences and interests. Classroom activities must be at an appropriate level for their skills. If they are too difficult, they may fail to promote language learning because they cause too much stress.

In many language classrooms the only time students get a chance to speak is when they are asked to practise previously learned formulaic sentences. They never get a chance to produce their own language. "The students have no reason to get involved or to think about what they are saying. Indeed, some students who have no idea what the sentences mean, will successfully repeat them anyway, while their minds wander off to other things". (Lightbown and Spada, 2001)

When learners are given opportunities to use their own language for real communication, rather than merely parroting a textbook example, their language skills will be stretched as they try to make themselves understood. I use the phrase 'real

communication' to emphasize that the learners are engaging in authentic communication and exchanging previously unknown information. Classrooms where learners are using and working with English will result in more efficient language acquisition.

Teachers may be greeted with a wall of blank uncomprehending faces when they first use English in a class. If they resort to using Japanese to solve the miscommunication, it merely reinforces the students' fears about not being able to speak or understand English. The students learn more from teachers who model how to negotiate for meaning. Teachers can rephrase what they just said, draw a picture on the board or perhaps all that is needed is to speak more slowly and clearly so the students can understand.

When students encounter a real-life situation where they need to communicate in English, they will probably stumble with the need to express ideas beyond their language ability. A successful classroom will give them many opportunities to learn strategies to cope in these situations.

Group Work Enhances English Skills

"This class was very using my brain". (Junior College student, 2006)

Using small groups and pair work encourages greater individual participation and reduces the threat of speaking English to a larger group. The language used in group-work will often be unpredictable so it aids language acquisition. Students cannot predict what language they will need to use next in a group discussion because it will depend on what their partners just said.

I find low-level learners sometimes do not want me to listen to their group discussions. This is not because they are using their first language, but because they know the 'inter-language' they are using to communicate with each other is not grammatically accurate. But after small group discussions they are curious to know the opinions of other groups. Because of this, they are quite comfortable choosing one member to report their discussion to the whole class. Students are comfortable making mistakes within the small group, but speaking to the whole class demands a higher level of accuracy, making it valuable for their language development.

Motivating Students to Use English

"In April, I couldn't speak at all, but now [July], I can speak smoothly! I really glad". (Junior College student, 2006)

Students will be more motivated if teachers encourage real communication in the classroom. In many classrooms students are required to answer questions even though they know the teacher already knows the answer. Of course students question the academic value of this and think, "Why bother?" If the teachers ask genuine questions, where they do not already know the answer, the student has a reason to try to communicate in English. Open, rather than closed questions are also more interesting for students. These are questions in which there is no right or wrong answer, and no specific formula can be used to answer the questions.

Involving students in the assessment of their work makes them think more carefully about their English study. They take notice of the assessment from their peers. Self-assessment and peer assessment are good ways of motivating learners to 'perform' at their best. I find the students very supportive in their comments and they also give useful advice on how their peers can improve next time. They are also eager to collect the feedback about their own work from other students.

Ideal Classroom

"I became not nervous to speak English". (Junior College student, 2006)

In an ideal classroom:

- Learners have opportunities to participate in communicative use of the language.
- There is a clear separation between the target language and their first language so they feel there is a need to communicate in the new language.
- Learners are exposed to communicative data which is comprehensible, relevant to their own needs and interests, and also challenging so that they strive to improve their language skills.
- Learners focus deliberately on various language

forms, skills, and strategies in order to support the process of language acquisition.

- Everyone in the classroom makes efforts to be understood. This means that the learners and teacher all use interactive strategies to make sure they are communicating effectively.
- There are opportunities for learners to experiment with new language and make mistakes, they do not feel pressured to produce perfect sentences.

Taken from Vale, Scarino and McKay (1991), Ellis (1990), Hadley (1993) and Ellis (1986)

The teacher simply making a rule banning Japanese cannot establish an English-only classroom. An effective classroom also requires an appropriate class atmosphere where students feel secure, are prepared to take risks, prepared to experiment with language and make mistakes. If the students' language ability is going to improve, it is essential that they experiment with the language and realize that experimentation always involves the risk of making mistakes. This means it is important for teachers to:

- Choose activities that are suited to the students' skill level.
- Make sure the students know it is OK to make mistakes.
- Gradually increase the difficulty of tasks to push students to improve their skills.
- Make sure the students understand what they are expected to do in each activity.

Conclusion

"Because this class was English only, when I try to talk with someone in English, now I can speak better". (Junior College student, 2006)

We should be aiming for students to be independent users of English by the time they graduate from college. They can only achieve this goal if we give them extensive opportunities to be involved in real communication in the classroom. This means expecting them to speak spontaneously. The more chances they have for authentic communication with each other, the greater the likelihood that their risk taking, and hence communicative confidence, will increase.

After graduation, even the most successful students will encounter situations where communication breaks down because of a need to communicate ideas that are beyond their language ability. If they have the confidence to negotiate meaning or start the conversation again using a different tactic, they will be able to cope in these situations. If students can successfully deal with the trouble caused by miscommunication, we can consider our teaching successful.

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