

A CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE SESSIONS FOR STUDENTS IN THE LOL LANGUAGE LOUNGE AT KAGOSHIMA UNIVERSITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Despite communicative ability in English being described as a high priority within the Ministry's policy (MEXT 2008), the traditional chalk and talk lecture style of education remains prevalent in the Japanese university lecture room, particularly in regional Universities such as ours. In this paper, we describe the establishment of a foreign language lounge, a learning space designed with the aim of fostering attitudinal change in students towards language learning. The following is a case study about the development of a language lounge, activity planning for English students and feedback on their experiences using the lounge.

Before entering university, Japanese school students study English as a compulsory subject for at least six years. Surprisingly, despite English language proficiency being referred to as a national educational priority by the Ministry of Education (MEXT 2008) stating that English education should, "develop students' basic communication abilities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, deepening their understanding of language and culture and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages," the reality is that a majority of students significantly lack confidence in their English skills and consequently lose interest in learning the language.

In addition, Japan's geographical location far from English-speaking countries, a recent decline in the number of students wishing to study abroad, as well as a relative lack of exposure to native / authentic content such as film and television content are also significant reasons behind students' lack of motivation towards English. The geographical location of Kagoshima prefecture and relative isolation potentially exacerbates this problem.

1.1 The influence of university entrance examinations

It can be said that it is hard to develop students' speaking skills in English in Japan. This may be attributed to the fact that the education system in Japan might not offer the students enough opportunities to practice speaking in English. In fact, many Japanese university students in Osterman's study (2014) reported that they blame pedagogy for their current lack of the willingness to communicate in English. Generally speaking, the students in EFL context like Japan have comparatively less opportunities to have conversations in English. In order to tackle this problem, students in Japan have at least six years of English education before entering university, and the government puts huge emphasis on communication. However, by the time they get to high school, they end up focusing on test taking strategies to prepare for the university entrance examination, where interaction in English is not required.

A University entrance examination may well be considered one of the biggest life events in Japanese society; this is because which university someone attends still matters a lot when seeking employment in the Japanese context. Therefore, some students even see the entrance examination as the ultimate

goal of learning. The problem is that the English test that students take in the entrance examination requires only three skills: reading, listening and writing (at least for now— according to MEXT (2017), the system is going to change from the year 2020 with the use of language proficiency tests conducted by private companies). Thus, students would rather devote their time to read, listen or write and view time and effort yet for speaking practice as not being worthwhile. What is worse is that the same thing applies to the high school English teachers—they are under a lot of pressure for nurturing the students to pass the entrance examinations, and they do not really have choices other than teaching test taking skills to students.

1.2 Background – Why establish a language lounge?

The following is a case study on the development and management of the language lounge ‘Language Out Loud’ (LOL). LOL was established to compliment and reinforce our existing foreign language courses with along with English, include Korean, Chinese, French and German. The focus of this case study is specifically to describe the English language sessions, the existing English language curriculum for EFL, and the student response to the language lounge experience.

Regardless of academic discipline, in their first two years Kagoshima University students are required to undertake a large component of general education (liberal arts) courses, in which foreign languages are included. Within the first-year general education curriculum all students (approximately 2000 students) undergo a minimum of 4 English compulsory language courses (class size averaging 35 students), consisting of two ninety-minute classes per week, per semester. As there is a relatively small number of native speaking instructors on staff, many of these courses are taught by Japanese instructors, some of whom are not specifically trained in language education, the result being in some cases lecture-style classes, largely being conducted in Japanese despite English being the target language.

Thus, while the reading and writing components of the curriculum may be generally well-catered for, opportunities for real communication in English, specifically speaking and listening in the target language, are seriously lacking. According to results reposted in the IR Consortium survey of Kagoshima University (2017), freshmen described their self-perception regarding their individual English language ability: students identified as CEFR level A1-B2 for listening, reading and writing, whilst a lowly A1-A2 for speaking. Another notable point from the same survey indicated that 82% of students responded that they had never been abroad, in a situation in which foreign language communication skill was needed. In addition to this, the motivation for students to study English, particularly if they do not perceive the language to be specifically or immediately useful to their chosen field of study, may be low. Therefore, to counterbalance some of the inadequacies of the existing curriculum and to provide better access to students to a variety of real language experiences with native speakers beyond the regular class environment, we have established a language lounge called LOL on campus.

1.3 English sessions in LOL

The lounge has been established to create a welcoming non-threatening environment that does not divide students according to their faculty major or school year.

Features of LOL English sessions:

- Comfortable learning space; capacity 32 students for activities (round tables)
- Average group size: 12 students, one facilitator

- Facilitators: Young part-time native speakers
- Emphasis on communication, no dictionaries, texts or pens
- Mixed faculties/mixed school years
- Mixed abilities
- Overseas students encourage to join
- Free to join any time, no registration required
- 45 or 90 minute sessions involving conversation, games and quizzes
- Special events are held periodically such as quiz nights, Christmas and Halloween events etc.
- Students who attend have a stamp card to track their attendance patterns and earn rewards

2. METHODOLOGY: The students survey

For the purpose of gaining student feedback on the first semester of the LOL English sessions, we conducted an online survey of all 131 students who participated in LOL sessions. The survey conducted via MANANBA in the final two weeks of first semester 2018, consisted of 10 questions including questions about their preferences for the style of sessions, reasons for not going back to the sessions, time considerations, level of English, ways to better promote the lounge and their general opinions on their individual outcomes from attending. In this paper, we will focus on their preferences for the style of session and reasons for not going back to the sessions, in order to find out what we could do to better plan and promote LOL in the next semester to bring more students into the English sessions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We shall now discuss some of the key feedback we received from the respondents to the survey. From the students who attended LOL sessions we received the following feedback.

Table 1. Outcomes of attending LOL

	Outcomes	Total
1	My English skill improved	16%
2	My motivation to learn English improved	26%
3	English felt less intimidating	6%
4	Did international exchange	18%
5	Learned about other cultures	11%
6	Made friends from other faculties/majors	4%
7	My communication skill improved	17%
8	Other	2%

Over a quarter of respondents answered that their motivation improved due to LOL, which was one of our main goals.

Table 2. The number of the LOL English sessions attended according to faculty.

Faculty	Veterinary medicine	Agriculture	Fishery	Engineering	Science	Education	Humanities	Total
Students who attended only once	8	6	4	6	3	4	7	38
Students who attended more than four times	14	3	3	22	2	2	12	58
Total number of participants	31	14	9	35	8	6	28	131

Interestingly, students from the Faculty of Education, which has an English department, scored lowest in number of the participants. Instead, the Engineering students have the highest numbers in participation, followed by the Veterinary Medicine and Humanities. Possible explanations for the results might include the fact that the teachers who are responsible for LOL English sessions taught these classes; they actively encouraged their students to participate, compared to other English teachers (i.e. the majority of the participants are from classes taught by teachers directly involved in LOL). This means that with better promotion, we might expect more students to join the sessions. Without a doubt, the cooperation and support from the faculty members is the key to the success of LOL. However, it is not feasible to invite all the faculty members to the sessions to let them get a general idea of its operations and content. In this sense, we could perhaps make a short introduction movie and forward it to the teachers, so all they would have to do is to play the video for the students. Also, Taylor (2014) suggests that posters and other promotional material could feature the students and staff, so it could attract more students who know these people. Therefore, to bring more students from the faculty of Education, which had the lowest participation rate, we could possibly ask some Education major students to be in our promotion video.

When it comes to the number of participations, 44 % of the participants attended the English session more than four times, while 29% of the participants attended only once. We will first focus on the reasons why those 29% never came back after their first session. Table 3 represents the students' comments on what aspects of the session did not appeal to them.

Table 3. The reasons why particular English sessions did not suit them

	Reasons	Total
1	The time schedule was not good for me	9
2	It was too difficult for me	3
3	Too many students in a room	4
4	I lost my confidence	5
5	I'm too shy to talk to strangers	4
6	It was not enjoyable	2
7	Others	4

The most common answer was “the time schedule was not good for me”; however, given that the sessions are mostly offered at lunch time and we have more students out of class around that time, clearly it is hard to cater to the needs of all students.

The second most common comment was, “I lost my confidence in speaking English, because other students were better.” Students seem to have a feeling that they are less capable than others, and that seems to be a source of anxiety for them. Previous study on Japanese students has also shown that fear of making a bad impression because of the inability to express oneself correctly causes anxiety (Williams & Andrade, 2008). One of the purposes of creating LOL is to offer students opportunities to practice their speaking skills, and thus we need to create a warm, encouraging atmosphere for all students to feel welcomed to make any mistakes. Therefore, the instructor should be a well-skilled language teacher who can monitor their students effectively, use a lot of encouragement and be able to bring shy students into discussions, making sure that the students gradually become confident in speaking English. Inviting the students with concerns to just observe the sessions could work as well; by doing so, the students can observe the varying levels of English and learn that the facility is not just for the more capable students, but for all (Bibby et al., 2016).

Also, four students wrote they were too shy to talk to strangers. One possible way of explaining why students responded this way might be that they never had to deal with a wide variety of people until high school. From elementary school to high school in Japan, students have a “homeroom class” which is consisted of around 40 students. They take every single lesson together regardless of the subject, in order to develop group coherence. Therefore, they might not be used to learning in a small group of new people, and they might be ashamed of making mistakes in front of them. One of the solutions to this problem could be to offer activities in which the purpose is to meet new people through learning language. If the goal is to learn how to expand their circle of friends, the students might feel less insecure about talking to other students. Noguchi (2015) also suggests that to enhance the students’ willingness to communicate, students might want to get to know each other and help each other. In this respect, we could use games and quizzes rather than debates and discussions; we will discuss this more later in this section.

We will now look at the feedback from the students who attended English sessions more than four times to find out what kind of sessions we should be increasing in number. In this the first full semester of the ‘LOL initiative’ a total of 131 students attended the English sessions, many of whom became regular attendees over a 10-week period. English sessions were held four times during the week.

4. SOME IMPLICATIONS FROM STUDENT FEEDBACK

From some specific sections of the survey, we came to several conclusions about how to proceed with management of the lounge in future to better accommodate students' needs and requests. It is important to maintain the LOL lounge's informal atmosphere while at the same time not allowing it to become simply an entertainment service for the students.

4.1 Using games and films in the LOL lounge

Students who participated were asked to list the activities they enjoyed most during their LOL sessions. As can be seen from the results (graph below), games and entertainment activities are overwhelmingly well-received with various card games and board game sessions earning the highest approval.

Other sessions dedicated to practicing English vocabulary and general speaking practice also ranked highly, which fulfils their purpose as one of the LOL's mainstays. And last but not least, the "watching movies" option is currently being implemented more due to student demand rather than feedback: it was not an official part of the LOL program (except as occasional "Movie Night" events) but a few trial runs by LOL staff met with positive response and currently one of the LOL sessions is dedicated to watching and following a US comedy TV show. The students have chosen these activities mainly for their own enjoyment, but there are also some significant benefits in employing them in an active learning environment such as the LOL lounge. The reasons for the implementation/expansion of game sessions and video watching sessions shall be discussed below.

Table 4: Student preferences about types of activities

Session Contents	Total
Card game / Board game	13
Vocabulary game	9
Organizing events/ Planning weekends	8
English game	8
The difference between American and British English	7
Gesture game	7
Guessing game	7
Current issues / Discussion	6
Tongue Twisters	2
Watching a movie	1

4.2 Games in the LOL lounge

There are many reasons why games deserve a place in language learning. First and foremost, they offer entertainment, which is extremely important for keeping students engaged and helping inactive members overcome their shyness and join in. Armstrong (2017) suggests board games are useful to train students' interpersonal intelligence because cooperation and competition during gaming sessions encourage communication. Games also play a big part in helping participants build relationships, and

to create a friendly and positive atmosphere which enhances the learning environment. Another reason is that most students expect to learn English for everyday communication purposes or for travel and thus games offer ample opportunity to practice the skills of negotiation, interpreting and giving directions as well as general speaking/reading practice. Board-games can also offer Japanese learners an opportunity to learn about the active board gaming culture outside of Japan. Last, but not least, organizing game sessions allows students to participate with little involvement from the instructor, giving them more freedom of action which may result in an increase in confidence according to Langran & Purcell, (1994), another one of the LOL lounge's goals stated earlier.

By consistently using board games, card games and role-play (all of these have already been tried in the LOL lounge at various times) we can confidently expect an increase in student interpersonal communication skills as well as their language skills. In addition, the social nature of card and board games may help the students who mentioned shyness and large group sizes as reasons for not attending many LOL sessions. Game sessions can be easily organized with splitting the larger groups and the social interactions during gameplay are less restricted or stressful than more formal communication.

4.3 Films in the LOL lounge

The usage of video materials in language teaching is an accepted method for both learning new vocabulary and practicing previously learned material. In the case of the LOL lounge the focus would be on TV shows and full-length feature films rather than educational videos in order to maintain an informal learning environment and to keep students interested. Movie nights were organized on several occasions with a very positive reception from the participating students so non-participants showed interest in them as well. In addition, as the LOL sessions last up to 90 minutes, full-length films are largely impractical and therefore shall be kept for special events (such as the aforementioned movie nights), while shorter videos from TV shows will be used during sessions to allow for discussion afterwards. As with games, students are more interested in the entertainment value but the use of films in the LOL lounge also has significant educational benefits, which is why the LOL management decided to go ahead and include them into the LOL activity list.

First, as listening practice and opportunity to learn vocabulary in real time: Katchen (2003) points out the authenticity of language used in films. Despite the scripts and acting, films are created to emulate real-life experience and thus are a good example of authentic language and conversation flow.

Second, by introducing students to TV shows of multiple episodes we can expect students to follow the shows in their free time and continue learning and practicing new vocabulary. Rodgers and Webb (2012) show how following related TV programs helps with practicing recurring vocabulary and is therefore beneficial for language acquisition as the students get used to the characters and the plot arcs. Xiaoqiong and Xianxing (2008) also suggested that using films and videos in language teaching and practice improved the listening and comprehension skills of the students. They also found that while teachers can teach listening using standard teaching materials, the students' interest as well as motivation to improve their listening skills increases when films are used during language teaching sessions.

Third, films and TV programs are nowadays readily available both streamed online and in disc format and students can discuss their own preferences, findings and recommendations with the instructors and each other, adding many opportunities for further communication and involvement through movie nights, events and other extracurricular activities.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall our first semester of operating the LOL language lounge has met our expectations as far as attendance and generally a very positive response from the student participants. We aim to take on all the student feedback, in addition to that of the session facilitators. Our aim is to expand the number and variety of activity sessions per week to make the experience more attractive, fulfilling and accessible to even more students. It is our hope that the lounge will become a starting point to reignite motivation towards communicative language use and cross-cultural exchange for Kagoshima University students.

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