

An Approach to Improving the School Environment for Promoting Active Attitudes of Students in English Classes at Japanese Junior High Schools

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Abstract

This paper aims to clarify the current problems regarding the environment at Japanese junior high schools and how they hinder students' improvement of their English communicative skills. I suggest that the teachers should pay attention not only to their teaching strategies for their English classes, but also to the overall framework of the school community. This includes the general atmosphere of everyday life and the frequency of conversations between the students and teachers. This should be done if they intend to encourage the students to speak English more effectively or to motivate them to interact with other people. Establishing a better school environment in which the students have numerous opportunities to discuss various issues ranging from their school lives to the world news by using their mother tongue consequently helps them improve their English-speaking skills and leads to their acquisition of wider perspectives for socialising in a globalised society.

Keywords: schools, environment, individuality, English, opportunity

Introduction

The results of the English achievement test targeting third-grade students at junior high schools, which was officially conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in April 2019 is said to have brought out the current issues regarding English communicative skills of junior

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high school students in Japan. Articles published in the Asahi newspaper on 1 August 2019 revealed that the percentage of the students who chose the correct answers for the questions specifically aimed at testing their English-speaking abilities was around 30%. This percentage is 26% lower compared to the one for the students who chose the correct answers for questions of other categories such as reading, listening and writing in English.¹ The article also introduced the opinion of the implementing agency, which considered the results as a serious issue and emphasised the necessity of consolidating the curriculum so that the teachers could take action to improve their teaching methods in English classes at each school.²

It has been long insisted by the Japanese government that school curriculum should be improved to adapt well to the rapid changes of our global society. MEXT decided to enhance the instruction of foreign languages — especially of English — by incorporating it into the curriculum of developing the interpersonal skills of students at every grade level. MEXT announced in 2018 that English should be compulsory at elementary schools starting from 2020. It has even been changing the entrance exam system at universities so that more of them would be required to assess the speaking and writing abilities of applicants in English in the near future, though the detailed plan of this system is still quite controversial. This means that students in every grade from elementary schools to universities are expected to reach the goals which will enable them to speak English fluently and thrive in a competitive world of business, academic research, and other fields in the future.³ Therefore, the results of the 2018 tests are said to have been a bit shocking for both the government and many school teachers. This will inevitably force each school to reconsider the framework of their curriculum or improve their teaching strategies in English classes. This is because the test results have given the impression that the current teaching methods are insufficient and that some drastic measures should be taken to establish a more efficient and coherent methodology in English classes.

It would be possible to consider a variety of exhaustive approaches to improve teaching methods in English classes from different perspectives, including increasing pair works and group activities, using electronic devices or connecting networks, or combining team teaching and individual works. All of these methods have become more and more common as they are thought to be practical and learner-centred in mastering communicative skills compared to the traditional styles of learning foreign languages in classes. It is true that many teachers at junior high schools have launched various kinds of approaches which they believe will dramatically change the situation. Accordingly, we should recognise that there are more fundamental issues that should be solved before setting out the goal of fluency in English or gaining higher scores in the English-speaking section of official achievement tests if we truly aim to improve students' communicative skills in English. At the same time, we need to cultivate human resources that are capable of flourishing in a globalised world.

In this paper, I clarify the backgrounds which hinder the positive attitudes of students at Japanese junior high schools and suggest how teachers could tackle those problems to change such a situation and establish a

better environment. We need to promote the active attitude of students not only in English classes but also in the entirety of their school life. I would like to present that it is essential for teachers to establish a flexible environment at schools, particularly at junior high schools, so that both the students and teachers are able to discuss various issues openly in their mother tongue before struggling to speak English fluently. This should occur even if their opinions sometimes seem to be at odds with the disciplinary policies of each school. The situation in which students are assured of delivering their opinions to other people is important and it needs the following basic conditions: opportunity, mutual respect, and the guarantee of being treated without any bias or preconceived notions. Students will be motivated to speak English positively for the first time when they believe their individual opinions are heard or when their teachers assure them that they are allowed to discuss various topics with each other outside the class if they need to talk about themes different from the authorised norm of their school's curriculum.

School Environment and Communicative Skills: The Current Measures at Junior High Schools

Presently, schoolteachers in Japan tend to incorporate active learning in their classes as the most valuable method of encouraging their students' motivation and individuality and English classes are not the exception. The definition of active learning itself is quite ambiguous, and the actual scenes of active learning in classes differ from situation to situation or from teacher to teacher. However, teachers have at least a common perception that active learning is effective for promoting their students' positivity and, in the case of English, their communicative skills. This phenomenon is in part due to the guidelines for teaching each compulsory subject at Japanese junior high schools, which were announced by MEXT in 2018. The general provision 3.1 in *Chugakko Gakusyū Sido Yoryo* (2018) reads that 'each school should endeavour to work towards improvement of individual classes to encourage students to take the initiative in solving various problems and also promote their dialogic interaction for more profound learning activity'.⁴ This means that teachers are required to establish effective ways to improve their students' communicative skills by enhancing logical-thinking and problem-solving activities in classes of all subjects rather than just giving one-way lectures or conducting academic tests featuring multi-option styles. As a consequence, active learning has become quite popular to the extent that it sounds like a mantra. In fact, many teachers at Japanese junior high schools have already started to seek a variety of new ways to promote their students' diligent attitudes in their classes. In English classes, activities like pair works, group discussions, presentations, and the mixture of them are becoming routine work.

On a premise that all of these practical methods in English classes are valuable, we need a lateral approach to view this phenomenon from a wider perspective. I would like to suggest that the improvement of the school environment should be prioritised if we aim to reach a proposed goal of the governmental guidelines. In this section, I will refer to a representative effort that many schools have made for a better school environment at

first, and then proceed further to the current problems surrounding the Japanese junior high schools by referring to the two examples which show the typical cases which make it difficult for students to become proactive in their statements.

It is true that many junior high school teachers are trying to create a better atmosphere in their schools so that the students can speak actively or communicate with each other in a cordial environment. One of the examples is that many Japanese schools from elementary schools to high schools try to establish morning greetings at the school gates into routine events to create a good environment for students to experience an invigorating start to their day. This kind of strategy might help to remove the barriers between the teachers and students and it might have a good effect on promoting students' positivity in communicating with each other. In fact, greetings are the essential part of communicative skills in a human society. Freiberg and Stein define this kind of environment as the 'school climate', which, according to them, is 'the heart and soul of a school' (11). They introduce a case study of a middle school in the United States, which decided to have a group of students greet both students and teachers at the school gate every morning to improve the climate of the school. Consequently, they succeeded in creating 'the "friendliness" of the school' (25). In Japan, there are also many schools which promote active participation of students in the events of a regional community so that the students could learn how to successfully cooperate with others.

However, we should also recognise that many schools diminish their students' motivation by failing to assure them that they are guaranteed the opportunity to give their opinions as a member of school community, not only in classes but also in other scenes in their school lives — at least if they have a legitimate reason. If they are deprived of the chance to deliver their opinions in Japanese, it would be much more difficult to expect them to speak positively in English. As Freiberg says, 'school is the one place that provides a common meeting place for future generations across the society. . . . In a democracy, school becomes the great socializer and preparer for entry into the citizenship of a country' (2).

The Necessity to Promote Discussion in Japanese: The Current Problems

The strange thing is that students at junior high schools are given few opportunities to make decisions concerning their school lives within their actual school setting. It is rare for teachers to encourage students to proactively and openly discuss school issues which they think might not be in accordance with ready-made school disciplines or might not be directly related to the subjects. This means that students are allowed to make their statements in very restricted conditions. Each class and school event are strictly coordinated by an individual teacher as well as the school, so students are persuaded to talk about specific topics which are prepared by teachers, who in most cases follow the authorised guidelines or their teachers' manuals. It will be possible for students to discuss something about social events and give their own ideas, but they are only allowed to do so to the extent that the teachers can keep the status quo or the students' positivity does not

disrupt the set belief of the pre-required school order. Accordingly, it is difficult for students, even for student council, to find the opportunity to openly discuss the raised issues at schools, particularly when their opinions resonate with the nuances of complaints against the conventional school rules or disciplines.

A typical example of diminishing students' involvement in improving their school environment is the presence of numerous strict school rules. This issue has recently become controversial in Japan. Ogiue and Uchida introduce several cases in which students and parents have felt unreasonable or humiliated because of some particular school rules since 2010, most of which they still feel are unfair and they do not understand why there are such rules. For example, some students, whose hair is natural brown, are forced to dye their hair black because the school rule says the colour of students' hair should be black. In other cases, there are students who become ill only because they are forbidden to wear scarves or tights in chilly weather. There is also a rule that the colour of female students' underwear should be white, which many students and parents now think to be sexual harassment (34-59). Ogiue mentions that these are just 'rules for rules', and are not designed for protecting the students and it shows how the misunderstanding of the concepts of rules in a society causes the current confusion (82-84). The problem is that students only have a few chances to discuss the reasonability of school rules with each other or to ask their teachers, for example, why female students have to wear white underwear or what serious problem would happen if their socks are one centimetre longer than the required length. This situation discourages students from becoming proactive in other situations which include their English classes. If teachers consider each school rule to be necessary for their students, they should at least be able to explain logically to them why those rules are important. The ideal could be that they are broad-minded enough to apply the opinions they receive from students to continue the discussions in which the students are able to join together without being frightened of detention. This is also a preferable method because it leads to the establishment of communicative skills.⁵ In that sense, not only the students but their teachers also need to seek the best way to promote their individual thinking.

Another example is the controversy surrounding extra-curricular activities. The guidelines announced by MEXT state that 'extra-curricular activities should be conducted in accordance with the self-initiative and spontaneity of individual student'.⁶ This indicates that students' self-initiative, including making a decision *not* to join the extra-curricular activities, should also be guaranteed and respected, because there is no mention in the governmental guidelines that joining those activities is obligatory or all the students should join that kind of activity. Some students might want to spend their time reading books, helping their family do household chores, playing musical instruments, or growing organic vegetables in their garden after school. All of these activities are just as meaningful as extra-curricular activities for nurturing communicative skills, because if students, not schools, make their own decisions of what to do after school, it means that they have the reasons which they are able to explain based on their choices. However, there are still some schools which enforce or strongly recommend that students join extra-curricular activities after school. This kind of

oppressive atmosphere has the risk of making students vulnerable and subsequently shatters the potential of their individuality. As a consequence, it will be difficult again for them to display their uniqueness nor accept other peoples' individual thoughts, in spite of the fact that the guidelines for teaching moral education at junior high school, which is referred to as linked to teaching foreign languages, advocates this in the following observation.

The purpose of teaching moral education is to encourage students to deliver their opinions and ideas while respecting other people's individuality and situations. It should also aim to promote students' better understanding of various perspectives and thereby nurture the humility and tolerance.⁷

This should enable them to accept the different cultures and personalities. Uchida also points out that there is no mention about the obligation of joining extra-curricular activities in the governmental guidelines from the viewpoint of working environment for school-teachers (171-73). I would like to make several suggestions for the solution in the next section.

The Potential of Students and Resolutions

In the above section, I referred to the current problems which contribute to discouraging students' positive attitudes towards improving their communicative skills. If teachers hope to incorporate active learning into their English classes to make it easy for their students to get rid of their shyness, their fear of saying something, or their fear of actively behaving in front of others, they should also implement the same methodology into the whole process of establishing the school environment in which students are able to absolutely have the same motivation of demonstrating what they have learned in their classes. The practice of free discussion in their actual school lives via their mother tongues will lead to their confidence in communicating with other people in English, because the fundamental concept of learning languages is facilitating better communication in any forms of mediation. It needs a certain period of time for training, particularly when we need to switch our languages depending on the individual scenarios, so it is important for teachers to endeavour to establish a better environment for their students' active attitude, not only in their classes but also in other situations. Some might say that meekness should be valued as a type of modesty and self-effacing capabilities, however, even so, if schools aim to reach the goal which the new governmental guidelines announced, they should change their consciousness. As Duff points out, 'learning to become competent in another language and culture after having already socialised into one's primary languages / cultures is, indeed, very challenging' (168). This means that schoolteachers are required to create a more inviting environment for their students to behave positively, because such an environment affects their students' consciousness and this change consequently helps them improve their communicative skills not only in Japanese but also in English.

There would be many possibilities for students to give their opinions about their school lives once they are allowed to do so. First, the students would be able to establish school rules on their own from scratch through discussion, in which case the student council could serve as a hub for passing on the opinions of students. Students should be more committed in making decisions on various aspects surrounding their school environment, in which case the important thing is that teachers do not intervene the process too much. Teachers could become distant observers instead of imposing conventional disciplines and value. Second, annual school events like festivals, sports day and excursion trips are also a good opportunity for students to improve their communicative skills. This can be accomplished by coordinating the entire events or itineraries, combining different opinions, or adopting brand-new designs on their own without being thwarted by imposed plans, all of which contribute to the exertion of their potential for self-expression and individuality.

Conclusion: The Balance of School Unity and the Students' Individuality

When we want to speak to someone through language, we need to construct the sentences and phrases in our brain. If we try to construct the sentences and phrases, we need to make clear what we want to deliver to that person before actually uttering the words. This means that we need to understand ourselves in what we want to say or what our message will be. It is true that learning basic grammar and doing a lot of exercises by repeating the same words and phrases again and again are quite important for mastering foreign languages. However, if the goal of learning those languages were to communicate with other people, we should also develop the habit of thinking ourselves, because just being able to speak some words like mechanical dolls does not lead us to the true meaning of communicative skills. In this sense, the current environment at Japanese junior high schools has much room for improvement. It seems that in most cases school policies and rules give much weight to the unity and the value of the bond, and they might have the effect of enhancing the cooperative attitudes and bring out victories in some class competitions. Therefore, it would be essential for schoolteachers to have a consciousness of the balance between unity and individuality, and the latter should not be spoiled by too much focusing on the former.

Notes

- 1 Daisuke Yajima, 'Eigo: Hanasu Kaku ni Kadai' (*Asahi Shinbun*, 1 August 2019, Seibu Honsha ed.)1. The details of the results of the 2019 results of the achievement tests announced by MEXT are also available on 'Zenkoku Gakuryoku Gakusyu Jokyo Chosa no Kekka'.
(<http://www.nier.go.jp/19chousakekkahoukoku/19summary.pdf> <9 September, 2019>).1.
- 2 Seiko Sadakuni and Mayumi Ujioka, 'Mazu Kiso Bunpo wo' (*Asahi Shinbun*, 1 August 2019, Seibu Honsha ed.)27.

- 3 Freiberg mentions that many economists predict that ‘education will be the next great global battle ground. The ability of a country to create and disseminate new knowledge and utilise existing knowledge and intellectual resources will determine the economic and social well-being of a country. A nation’s ability to enhance its education system and schools will be the pathway to this well-being. Knowing how this place called school enables or inhibits the learning process is an important factor in the success of any educational organisation and the future success of a country’ (2).
- 4 *Chugakko Gakusyu Sido Yoryo*: Heisei 29-nenn Kokuji (Monbukagaku-sho, 2018)23. The English translation is mine.
- 5 Bernard introduces several examples of class environment at Rosegarden school, which is an intermediate school in New Zealand. He refers to the detailed patterns of class environment in Ms Wilkins’ class and how her responses towards her students were appropriate for each case, because, ‘Rather than directly transmit instructions, task requirements and conceptual constructs, Ms Wilkins generally preferred to encourage the active – if often vicarious – participation of the class by sharing understanding with and among her students in give-and-take dialogue’ (159).
- 6 General Guidelines, 5.1. (*Chugakko Gakusyu Sido Yoryo*) 27. The English translation is mine.
- 7 *Chugakko Gakusyu Sido Yoryo*, 155. The English translation is mine. As for the necessity of linking foreign languages to moral education, please see page 153.

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