

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Motivation and the awareness of JTEs as L2 users

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This paper is an account of an action research project conducted at a high school in Japan. An investigation into how English is used and taught in the school was done through classroom observations, student questionnaires and interviews with Japanese teachers of English (JTEs). It was found that both JTEs and students are self-conscious about speaking English, which, combined with the pressure to teach for university entrance examinations, has resulted in almost no English being used in the classroom. 'Guest interview' classes, involving JTEs being interviewed by a native English speaker, were organized in an attempt to improve the JTEs' status as L2 users in the school. It was found that students were motivated and developed a stronger image of the JTEs as L2 users. The results imply that JTEs are an underutilized resource and have the potential to motivate their students by acting as role model L2 users.

本論文は、ある日本の私立高等学校で行われた実地研究プロジェクトの報告です。日本人英語教師 (JTEs) へのインタビューと、授業観察、そして生徒へのアンケートを通して、英語がこの学校でどのように教えられ、又どのように使われているかという最初の調査が行われました。その結果 JTEs として生徒の両方が英語を話すことに対して評価の恐れを感じていることがわかりました。これは大学入学試験の為の教育に対する圧力という問題と並んで、実際英語がほとんど授業で使われていないという状況にその問題点があるという結果に至りました。以上の状態を改善すべく、ネイティブスピーカーの教師による授業の一つ「ゲストインタビューシリーズ」に、学校の JTEs を第二言語ユーザーとして招き行われました。これにより、一つ目に生徒がこの授業に積極的に興味を表した事、そして二つ目に生徒が JTEs に対して第二言語ユーザーとしてのイメージを強く持っている事が分かりました。これらの結果として、JTEs が十分に活用されていない資源であることを意味し、又第二言語ユーザーの生のモデルとしての働きをすることによって、彼らの生徒をより積極的に授業に参加させる可能性があるかと判明しました。

**T**his is an account of an action research project undertaken at a private girls' secondary school in Japan. As a combined junior and senior high school, the junior high school students are able to enter the high school without taking an entrance examination, although some high school first graders are from other junior high schools. The school has nine Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) and

two native English speaking teachers (NESTs). None of the English classes in the school involve team-teaching.

This study started from simple questions, such as ‘Why are students reluctant to use English in the classroom?’ and ‘Why do I never see the English teachers use English with the students?’ Following a brief look at related research, a description of an investigation into how English is used and taught in the school is given. After that the action strategy developed as a result is described and evaluated; briefly, this consisted of a series of simple steps, starting with students developing questions which were then put to the JTE by the NEST. Students then completed simple tasks based on the JTE’s replies. The main goal of the strategy, however, was to expose the students to the L2 skills of their JTEs, who can act as strong role models for the students since they share the same ethnicity and background; this similarity in background gives JTEs the potential to be more powerful role models than NESTs.

## Background

### *L2 Users*

Cook (1999) argues that more prominence should be given to L2 users. It is precisely the opposite - a focus on the native speaker - that ‘has obscured the distinctive nature of the successful L2 user and created an unattainable goal for L2 learners’ (p.185). He argues that the benefits of recognizing L2 users as speakers in their own right will be the positive images created in the minds of teachers and students alike. With the native speaker model being dominant in language teaching, L2 users are usually judged as being failed

native speakers. In the classroom, Cook (1999) suggests that students should be exposed to examples of skilled L2 use. He claims that students may feel intimidated by the perfection of the native speaker’s language use and that they may prefer the non-native speaker teacher as a more achievable model. The advantage of the non-native speaker (NNS) as a role model L2 user is described by Cook (2000) - ‘the NNS teacher is someone who has arrived where the students want to be, not someone who happens to have been born there’ (p.330).

### *Native speaker focus in language teaching in Japan*

Honna & Takeshita (1998) point out the apparent native speaker focus in the make up of the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) programme, which utilises young overseas university graduates as assistant language teachers in elementary and secondary schools – teachers are predominantly from Inner Circle countries (countries where English is the native language; see Kachru & Nelson, 1996). They suggest that English is not dealt with as a global language and that English is seen as the language for communication between native-speakers and Japanese.

They also claim the unrealistic objectives of reaching native-like proficiency are responsible for the current low level of achievement in Japan. Students are ashamed if they do not speak like native speakers and ‘cannot accept their limited proficiency as natural and good enough for communication’ (p.118). They argue that Japanese students do not seem aware of how common and international the English language is, and tend, therefore, to view the Japanese variety with feelings of failure, shame and guilt.

They suggest that native speaker focus is the underlying reason for the fear of negative evaluation and the teaching of ‘Examination English’.

### *Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs)*

#### *JTEs’ use of English*

One goal of the 2003 action plan published by Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is to have teachers conduct lessons mostly in English and have the students participate in activities where they can communicate in English. Murphey & Sasaki (1998) and Welker (1996) identify fear of evaluation and making mistakes as reasons why many JTEs don’t use English in class.

#### *JTE teaching methods*

The dominant teaching method in Japan’s high schools is *yakudoku* (Gorsuch, 1998), which involves a word-by-word translation of the text being studied, followed by a reordering of the words to fit Japanese syntax and then a recoding into more understandable Japanese. Porcaro (2004) is highly critical of the method, suggesting it is actually of no help in preparing students for university entrance exams. Komiya Samimy & Kobayashi (2004) suggest that while team-teaching is supposed to encourage communicative activities, in reality there is often a division of labour between NESTs and JTEs that reinforces a stereotypical image - that non-native teachers of English cannot be role models for students with respect to achieving communicative confidence in English.

### *Investigating the school culture*

Data was gathered from interviews with JTEs (Japanese teachers of English), observations of JTEs’ classes, and questionnaires completed by first-year high school students.

#### *Class observations*

Three classes taught by JTEs were observed – two first year high school classes and one second year junior high school class. There was a marked difference between the junior high and high school classes. In the junior high class, the teacher used English for many instructions, such as ‘Raise your hands’, and questions such as ‘How’s the weather today?’. In the high school classes, the amount of English used was minimal. Instructions and explanations by the teachers were given in Japanese and students only spoke English when reading aloud directly from the textbook, and often at very low volumes. The method of instruction used by the JTEs in the classes was the *yakudoku* method described by Gorsuch (1998).

#### *Student questionnaire*

Eighty-one first-year high school students completed a questionnaire (see appendix for full questionnaire and results), which was designed to get information on the following areas – language use in class, motivation and goals, native-speaker focus, beliefs about JTEs, beliefs about language learning, learning strategies and self-assessment. The questionnaire showed the questions in both English and Japanese.

The key findings from the questionnaire were threefold. Firstly, the replies to Q9, Q11 and Q12 (see appendix) indicated that the students appear to have a native-speaker focus, with 74 of 81 respondents agreeing that native-speaker teachers are preferable for oral communication (Q9) and over 95% of students agreeing that ‘excellent’ pronunciation is important for them (Q11) and their Japanese teachers (Q12). Secondly, the students evaluated their success at language learning poorly and also held a dim view of their prospects of future success. 61 out of 81 disagreed that they had been successful English learners thus far (Q22), and more than half did not have confidence in their future improvement (Q23). These negative views were consistent across all classes, with higher-level students unable to perceive their relative success. This may be a consequence of native-speaker focus - as Cook (1999) argues, if students focus on unachievable goals, they are doomed to be failures in their own eyes. Lastly, they reported being self-conscious when speaking English in front of other people (Q20), but also claimed to feel more self-conscious when speaking in front of their peers (Q21) – this suggests that the class culture in this school seems to be one where risky behaviour, such as speaking a foreign language, is scrutinized and evaluated rather than supported.

### *JTE Interviews*

Eight JTEs teaching at the school were interviewed. A semi-structured approach was taken to the interviews, with interviewees being guided towards topics. Some questions were prepared beforehand, for example:

- Please describe a normal grammar/reader class.
- When do you use English and when Japanese?
- Does your teaching approach change when teaching JHS/HS?
- Are the student’s attitudes towards using English different with different levels?
- What advice would you give a new (high school/JHS) JTE?

A number of points emerged from the interviews.

### *Students using English in class*

The classroom is not a place where students want to speak English as it is fraught with social risk. When asked to repeat after the teacher, they often use a ‘low voice or no voice’. Students avoid speaking in front of peers, and some girls that can speak fluently hide their ability by faking a heavy Japanese accent when speaking in front of classmates. Being ‘average’ is the most important thing for students.

### *Students’ reactions to JTEs’ English*

Some teachers have tried using English in class, but common student reactions are to stop listening, to sleep, or to start chatting. For some students, seeing their JTEs speak English with one of the school’s NESTs is a novelty and they may make a comment like “Wow, you can speak English!” The teachers seem to be sensitive to these reactions, and they have a sense of being evaluated by the students.

### *Teachers speaking in front of other teachers*

Most JTEs said that they had rarely heard other JTEs speak English. Some teachers appear to feel shy when speaking English with other Japanese people. This leads to behaviour designed to avoid negative evaluation, such as talking slowly to avoid making mistakes. Using English with the NESTs seems to be less stressful, but the presence of other Japanese teachers can cause anxiety. Thus, English conversations in the teachers' room can be tense situations for JTEs, who sense that everyone is listening. One teacher tries to speak English faster to avoid being understood by Japanese teachers; other teachers' tactics are speaking quietly or avoiding speaking altogether and using memos to communicate instead.

### *The differing approaches in junior and senior high school*

The fact that the junior high students in the school can move up to the high school without taking an entrance exam provides teachers with freedom to focus on motivating students and they find that it is easier to use English with junior high students. The approach in high school changes due to three things. One is a change in the type of textbook, which uses longer and more difficult texts and is taught with the *yakudoku* method, which is described by one teacher as 'boring' and the reason why the students don't like English. Another factor mentioned was that the high school classes are not only made up of students moving from the affiliated junior high school, but also students from other schools, whose experience of English teaching will have been

different. Lastly, the most common reason given for not using much English in high school classes is the influence of University entrance exams. Motivating students becomes lower priority for teachers and the approach changes to cover a large amount of material in a short time. Students and school management alike complain if teachers do not keep to test-specific material.

## **Developing and implementing an action strategy**

### *Identifying the problem*

I wanted to address the problem of the lack of English use inside and outside the classroom. In the interviews, I found all the JTEs to be capable or even accomplished English speakers. Unfortunately, it is apparent that their students rarely see them speak. I began to develop a long-term goal to make English use a normal part of school life, instead of a marked event. As long as English use is considered unusual, it will be a cause of self-consciousness and the fear of evaluation. It was clear that in our school the anxiety felt when speaking English was real for teachers as well as students, and it occurred to me that the teachers might be inadvertently passing on this fear to students.

Doyon (2000), in explaining Japanese students' shyness, mentions 'The Way'. The word *do*, meaning 'the way', is seen in words such as *judo* and *kado* (flower arrangement), arts in which one must be shown 'the way' by a master. More generally, people are not encouraged to find their own way but to follow, and in unfamiliar situations can freeze or panic, having not been shown 'the way'. I came to realise that role models were an integral part of traditional education

in Japan. It was also clear that the role model should be someone who had ‘arrived where the students want to be’ and not ‘born there’ (Cook, 2000). In our school, the JTEs may encourage students to speak, but they do not *show* students ‘the way’.

My goals in creating an action strategy were:

- to motivate the students by exposing them to Japanese role models who are skilled L2 users
- to raise the profile of the JTEs as L2 users amongst the students and in the school
- to have students listen to English with a focus on meaning not form – in other words ‘awareness-lowering’ (Oka, 2004).

### *Developing the action strategy*

Following the research done on the motivating effect of near peer role models by Murphey (1998), I came upon the idea of doing interviews with JTEs. Although JTEs are not really ‘near peers’ of the students, they share ethnicity and background with them and are ‘near’ in this sense. The concept is simple – by seeing someone from a similar background use English skillfully, students will develop stronger beliefs that they, too, can succeed and have a clear goal in their language study.

Four factors guided the development of the guest interview lesson structure. Firstly, since many teachers in interviews mentioned that students’ interest is piqued by personal stories, I wanted to focus on personal content. Secondly, I felt it necessary to give the students a task related to the

interview to ensure their attention. Thirdly, I wanted the guest to assume the status of L2 user rather than L2 teacher, so I established ‘rules of engagement’, such as avoiding doing class management, with the teacher beforehand. Lastly I wanted to avoid required student production, since the questionnaire results showed that many students are self-conscious speaking English in front of their peers. Student involvement was maintained by having them draw up the questions.

### *Proceeding with the ‘guest interview’ classes*

The classes followed simple steps:

1. Students write questions for JTEs
2. NESTs ask JTEs the questions
3. Students perform written tasks based on the JTEs answers

The first step was conducted in the class preceding the interviews (although this is not necessary). The JTEs concerned were shown the questions to allow them to prepare, and inappropriate questions, such as ‘How old are you?’ were removed. At the beginning of the interviews, students were asked to form a semi-circle and I sat with the guest JTE in the centre. I then asked the JTE a selection of the questions written by the students, with some follow-up questions, typical questions being ‘What kind of music do you like?’ and ‘Why did you become an English teacher?’

After the interviews, the students returned to their desks and wrote down three things that they had learned about the JTE and wrote one more question that they would like

to ask the JTE. On completion of these tasks, the students were then given feedback sheets and asked to write their impressions of the interview class in Japanese.

In total, four ‘guest interview’ classes were conducted involving the three JTEs teaching the first year high school students.

### Evaluating the guest interview classes

#### *Did the guest interviews have an effect on motivation?*

A number of students reported that they wanted to speak English well and this may be a sign of improved motivation. Some responses explicitly linked this to a reported altered perception of the JTE as an L2 user, illustrated by the following comments:

‘She hasn’t used much English in class... I want to be able to speak English like her.’

‘I thought she’s great at English. I want to become fluent, too.’

Many students’ feedback used the phrase *kakkou ii*, which translates as ‘cool’ and this is evidence that the JTEs can act as role models for the students. Examples include:

‘Speaking English is cool... I want to be able to speak fluently, too.’

‘Sensei looks cool when she talks with David.’

#### *Did the interviews improve the status of JTEs as L2 users and /or role models?*

Indicators that the JTEs’ English skills were greater than students had imagined are comments showing how surprised the students were to hear them use English (teachers’ names have been changed):

‘It was interesting to see Takahashi sensei speaking loads of English. I got a kind of shock.’

‘I was surprised that she was fluent.’

It is difficult to be a role model L2 user when you are never seen to speak the L2. The following comments show clearly that this JTE had not used any English in class before.

‘I was happy to hear Suzuki sensei speak English for the first time.’

‘It was the first time to see Suzuki sensei speak English. It was something new. We saw a different Suzuki sensei than usual.’

#### *Did using personal topics achieve ‘awareness lowering’?*

Many students commented on the content of the teachers’ answers, for example:

‘I’m a little surprised a teacher has 3 kids. Doing a job and having a family is amazing I thought. I could see a side of Suzuki sensei that I didn’t know.’

‘I was surprised to hear she lives in Kyoto.’

Comments like this are evidence that the interviews succeeded in getting some students to focus on meaning in a way that the JTEs' normal method of instruction apparently does not.

In contrast, one of the JTEs, Suzuki, was very aware of the form of her own answers. In a post-class interview, her first comment was:

‘You asked “Do you have any pets?”’, “No I don’t”, “Oh you don’t have pets?”, I said maybe I said “yes”, I have to say “no”.’

This is indicative of the teacher viewing herself as a failed native speaker. The fact that the teacher had this attitude, while none of the students did, raises the possibility that the teacher might somehow be modeling this attitude to the students – if this is the case, then teachers themselves need to be made aware of themselves as competent L2 users.

### Conclusion

The format of the ‘guest interview’ classes was easy to organize and implement and could easily be reproduced in other schools without long preparation – it relies on trust and co-operation between JTEs and NESTs. It encourages student involvement and engagement without pressure, and shows the JTE and NEST as language users, not just teachers. There are three simple steps:

1. Students write questions for JTEs
2. NESTs ask JTEs the questions
3. Students perform written tasks based on the JTEs answers

The classes appeared to trigger a spark of motivation in some students. However, whether this has actually been translated into concrete efforts to do so is not known and is a question to consider for future research. Some teachers lack confidence in their English and have a fear of being evaluated and they alter the way they speak as a result. It makes sense that they would be more willing participants if they could gain some confidence and become less self-conscious; taking action toward this goal might help develop JTEs' potential as role model L2 users. This could involve initiating teacher discussion groups using English – initially led by a native speaker to help validate the use of English at the beginning – in order to help teachers feel less self-conscious using English and feel more of an L2 user, to experience themselves as English speakers. It would also give them experience of communicating with other Japanese in English. For the students, I need to consider in what ways students can be exposed to skilled L2 use. As well as continuing the interviews in the present format, I could also bring in Japanese teachers of subjects other than English or Japanese people in the local community that use English in their life.

### *Implications for language teaching in Japan*

The taking up of stereotypical roles by JTEs and ALTs may be considered a shortcoming of the JET programme. The programme could be more effective if JTEs take up the position of role model and interact on an equal footing with ALTs as in the guest interviews in this study. In this way they can show themselves as L2 users. They can show the students ‘the way’. For their part, NESTs, whether in team-



teaching situations or not, can use the simple steps outlined above to conduct their own interview classes and help develop the potential of their Japanese colleagues as role models for the students.

**Note:** Personal names and place names used in the paper have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants.

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## Appendix

## Questionnaire results

Q		strongly agree	agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	disagree	strongly disagree	average
1	I went to Josei Gakuen Junior High School	55	0	0	0	0	26	4.40
2	I often speak English in my grammar class	0	11	22	27	11	10	3.16
3	I often speak Japanese in my grammar class	21	29	18	5	3	3	4.65
4	It's fun to speak English	14	19	26	11	5	6	4.10
5	If I learn English very well, it will help me get a good job	35	23	11	4	1	6	4.86
6	I would like to learn English to get to know other English speakers better	16	16	29	13	2	5	4.20
7	Without exams, it's important to study English conversation	26	30	17	1	2	5	4.77
8	The main reason I need English is to pass exams in the future	9	23	30	12	4	3	4.15
9	It's better to study oral communication with a native-speaker teacher	39	24	11	5	1	1	5.14
10	It's better to study grammar with a Japanese English teacher	15	30	17	10	4	5	4.33
11	It's important for me to speak English with an excellent accent	22	35	20	4	0	0	4.93
12	It's important for a Japanese English teacher to speak English with an excellent accent	28	36	15	0	0	2	5.06
13	Japanese Teachers don't need to speak English in class	3	4	11	22	21	20	2.59
14	I would like my Japanese English Teachers to use more English in class	10	8	36	19	3	5	3.85
15	People that speak more than one language are very intelligent	19	39	14	7	1	2	4.76
16	It is better to learn English in an English-speaking country	17	27	23	9	2	2	4.53

Q		strongly agree	agree	slightly agree	slightly disagree	disagree	strongly disagree	average
17	Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules	4	23	28	19	5	2	3.95
18	Learning English is different from learning other school subjects	5	20	36	13	5	2	4.01
19	I am less interested in English now than when I was a JHS student	7	6	14	28	11	14	3.10
20	I feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people	19	28	15	7	7	5	4.37
21	I feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other students in my class	25	25	14	10	4	3	4.59
22	I have been successful at learning English	2	3	15	38	12	11	2.91
23	I am confident to improve my English from now on	5	6	18	33	11	8	3.22
24	Making mistakes is okay in English	12	29	31	4	3	2	4.46
25	Some people have a special ability which helps them learn English	6	17	28	15	11	4	3.75
26	Japanese people are not good at learning English	9	15	25	17	6	9	3.72
27	It's easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it	7	19	23	19	8	5	3.79
28	English is difficult	40	28	10	1	0	2	5.25