Lifelong Learning: Designing an English Education Programme for Japan

Nicholas Musty
Kwansei Gakuin University

Reference Data:
Musty, N. (2016). Lifelong learning: Designing an English education programme for Japan. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Focus on the learner*. Tokyo: JALT.

The widespread practice of adults learning English is one that has received attention from some researchers (Jarvis, 2004; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011; McCombs, 1991). In Japan, there is an industry of private conversation schools leading the way in language instruction for this demographic. However, with the country increasingly identifying the need for further globalisation of an ageing, declining population, fresh thinking is required. In this paper, I consider lifelong learning, paying special attention to 4 key elements: opinions on previous experience in education, motivation, appropriate topics for learning material, and self-learning. Based on previous research and the results of interviews conducted with 8 people living in Japan who have experience of extracurricular lessons in English, tentative recommendations are made with reference to conclusions drawn from the research, including the offering of a diversity of courses and an oral focus.

世界中に英語を学んでいる成人が多くいる。教授方法も沢山あり、研究対象（Jarvis, 2004; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011; McCombs, 1991）にもなっている。日本では、特にこの成人の英語教育を英会話学校に任せている。しかしながら、高齢化社会やグローバル化等を考慮すると、教え方の是非を問う必要がある。この研究では、日本にいる英語学習者8人を対象に、どのような授業なら生涯学習が成功するかという意見を聴取し、子供時代の英語授業、やる気、話題、学習時間の4つに重点を置きました。その結果、「もっと会話に注目したい」「コースを選ぶ時にもっとオプションを増やして欲しい」などの意見が得られた。

A great deal of research on language learning in Japan focuses on younger learners, generally those no older than a typical university student. However, this focus tends to overlook the specific needs of adult learners, of whom there are many within Japan's large industry of private language schools, where I spent my first 3 years as an instructor. It is suggested that traditional methods, such as grammar translation, a common feature of English education in Japan (Gorsuch, 2001), are increasingly inappropriate from the teenage years onward (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011), meaning that there is a need for research that can point the way towards suitable methods of English language learning for the mature learner in Japan. Because such learners are rarely required to take classes in the English language, it is obvious that their perception of learning is at least as important as learning itself (Allwright, 1984). Without their positive evaluation of a learning course, they are unlikely to enroll. Therefore, the opinions of adult learners of English can be seen as vital in the construction of a programme that is aimed at them.

In this paper I present the results of an exploratory study into lifelong learning experiences in Japan. Lifelong learning, also known as adult education, refers here to the concept of formal education (typically classroom based) that is aimed at people who have returned to or even commenced education as adults, spanning various life stages, each of which can be characterised as being quite different (Erikson, 1959), although the umbrella term does not differentiate between them. Contrary to popular belief, students of all ages are said to be able to learn a foreign language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). By interviewing eight people, I aimed to find out more about the perceived needs of a group of adult learners of English.

Background to the Study

English Language Education in Japan

In building a model of education, the needs of the individual, organisation, and society as a whole clearly have to be acknowledged (Knowles et al., 2011). Of these three dimensions, the one that is common throughout this paper is Japanese society, which undoubtedly influences all aspects of the learning experience. Population change in Japan has been well documented ("The Incredible Shrinking Country," 2014). Japan is said to have the world's fastest ageing population; the number of people aged 65 or over is now more

than 22%. This provides one reason for dedicated schools aimed at educating mature learners in the English language. There are other motivating factors. In particular, Japanese companies—such as the Internet shopping firm Rakuten (Takeda & Fujimoto, personal communication, 2013)—seeking global success are introducing English as the main language of the workplace. Not only can businesses send employees to learn English, retirees and homemakers with an interest in overseas travel are also potential students of a programme of English language learning; obviously, three groups with distinct needs (Kelly, 1999).

Many Japanese people do recognise the benefits of studying English. Over 93% of business people surveyed acknowledged an increasing need for the language (British Council, 2011). With government investment and research backing, learning could be undertaken in a manner that ensures that the learner thrives and society as a whole is served by the improvement in English competence and the resultant potential for global communication.

Lifelong Learning

It is suggested that the mature learner follows a learning path that differs from that taken by younger learners (Knowles et al., 2011). In comparison to childhood education, a different set of difficulties is suggested, which include the following:

1. Learning goals are not shared by all participants. Targets are not relevant to all learners, therefore they struggle to adopt them.
2. The relationships and climates formed in adult educational establishments are not sufficient to ensure quality learning.
3. Practices do not reflect human need for quality education.
4. Autonomous learning practices are not being taught to students (McCombs, 1991, p. 120).

As a solution, very generally, the idea of positivity in the learning system (Jarvis, 2004), which involves flexibility and learner autonomy, is an attractive one, empowering learners and encouraging them to use their initiative where possible. One concrete approach to this suggestion is discussed in the next section.

Andragogy

Andragogy refers specifically to the education of adult learners and can be contrasted with pedagogy, referring to the education of children. The term is now primarily associated with the work of Malcolm Knowles, particularly in North America where it is the best known approach to adult education (Pratt, 1998). This concept is based on six principles, set out in Table 1 and shown in contrast to traditional views of pedagogy.

Table 1. Summary of the Principles of Andragogy, in Comparison With Traditional Pedagogies

Principle	Implications for andragogy	Implications for pedagogy
1. Learner's need to know	Determined by the learner	Determined by the teacher
2. Self concept of the learner	Varies according to learner, may depend on teacher	Learners are dependent on teacher
3. Prior experience of the learner	Learner experience is valuable and will depend on individual	Learner experience is of little worth
4. Readiness to learn	Dependent on learner	Determined by the teacher
5. Orientation to learning	Learning can be divided in many ways	Learning is divided by subject
6. Motivation to learn	Dependent on learner	Motivation is external

(Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011, pp. 60-62)

An as example, here is an illustration of the fifth principle: Students could be taking a form-based class such as *grammar* as opposed to a function based one, *letter writing*. Educational providers need to consider the most appropriate way of supporting the learning process by addressing each of these principles. Andragogy has been criticised for a lack of clarity. For example, Knowles et al. (2011) advocated self-directed learning but did not state whether this is a goal or a method. Social content is also somewhat overlooked. However, despite these drawbacks, the approach of Knowles et al. has been pervasive, particularly in North America. This raises the question of whether the same principles could be applied in Japan. In fact, andragogy has been advocated for Japanese learners (Kelly, 2013) and this research will explore its applicability.

Educational Change

Introducing unfamiliar learning approaches is not easy and this is particularly so when the new approach is very different from the existing one (Carless, 2003; Wedell, 2003).

There are examples of syllabus changes that have struggled in Japan (Browne & Wada, 1998; Gorsuch, 2001), with the implication that change is not easy here. In order to tackle this, a process of empowerment is recommended (Hopkins, 2000); individual schools and their students are urged to be involved in the process of change, as well as ongoing assessment and adjustments to the new system (Lamb, 1995; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007).

Based in particular on the issues surrounding the education of adults in Japan that have been raised in this paper so far, a programme of research was conducted with the aim of investigating the options for educational establishments for adult learners of English. The aim was to seek solutions to some of the problems currently experienced in this sector and discuss the potential for changing established teaching approaches by applying andragogy.

Methodology

In this exploratory study I used semi-structured interviews to uncover adult attitudes toward lifelong learning in Japan. The aim was to allow interviewees to freely state their opinions, with particular reference to four key areas, which had emerged in the literature reviewed.

1. Existing learning practices, specifically those experienced in childhood education (Gorsuch, 2001; Knowles et al., 2011)
2. Motivation and learning (Knowles et al., 2011)
3. Experience and learning (Knowles et al., 2011)
4. Autonomy and self-directed learning (McCombs, 1991)

Interview questions (see Appendix) were written in order to probe respondents' opinions in these four areas. The first area focused on existing practices, the common experience shared by all interviewees, with a consideration of other methodologies that might be used (such as andragogy). The second area related to the sixth principle of andragogy—the importance of motivation in order to gain a commitment to learning. The third related to experience, distinguished as being very different from young people's in education and another principle of andragogy (Knowles et al., 2011). The last question was intended to explore learner attitudes to independence and frequency of contact. This related to the problems identified by McCombs (1991) as significant for adult learning.

Eight people were interviewed on the subject of lifelong learning. Interviews, conducted in places of mutual convenience such as cafes, offices, or homes, lasted from 8 to 25 minutes and were conducted primarily in English, although Japanese was also used in order to ease communication. I recorded the interviews and, on listening back, completed an interview capture document, which contained each interview question with a space in which to write a summary of each response.

All participants were current learners or regular users of English living in and around Osaka. All but one, from China, were Japanese. Their levels of ability ranged from pre-intermediate to advanced. All were capable of conversing for the majority of the interview in English. Two used English every day in their jobs. Ages ranged from 20s to 60s and the group included office workers, retirees, managers, and homemakers. Two were male and six female, and I knew all personally as friends, students, or coworkers. They did not receive any financial compensation for their time. I analysed the participants' responses based on the four research areas, looking for commonalities and differences across participants.

Findings and Discussion

Regarding views on educational experiences in childhood, methods that respondents had experienced were unanimously dismissed as being irrelevant to adult education. Respondents said that classes were too large and content was impractical. Five of them felt that there had been too much focus on grammar. When asked what kind of approach would be more suitable, seven respondents wanted to focus on communicative aspects of the language, which was in contrast to their earlier learning experiences. In addition, two respondents highlighted a desire to learn from a native English speaker (one felt that "of course the English speaking country people are better").

Regarding motivation, although learners indicated that they were influenced by a range of factors, the desire for successful oral communication was described by all but one as a key motivation. This included both listening and speaking abilities, whether in a conversation or to the media. One participant commented that motivation increased when he could "talk to . . . native speakers well"; another said that failure in communication could lead to demotivation. Only one interviewee contradicted this, suggesting that communicative success could actually lead to complacency. On the subject of demotivation, the same respondent stated that national identity could be a barrier to motivation to learn: "Many [Japanese] people hate . . . to have a conversation or just see English." This opinion apparently stemmed from the experiences of his wife and colleagues.

On the point of experience, the principle of prior experience (Knowles et al., 2011) implies that mature learners can be encouraged to base their learning on existing knowledge rather than being forced to create an entirely new skill set. On this point I asked respondents whether they were more comfortable studying English through topics with

which they were familiar or through something new. The results were divided, with six respondents hoping to be able to rely on existing concepts at least some of the time, and six wanting to deal with some less familiar material (four of them acknowledging the benefits of both). One participant observed that "in our real situation, we usually talk about both [familiar and unfamiliar concepts]." Knowles's principle is therefore not persuasive for all learners and may in fact be impractical. One potential solution is to give students a familiar launch pad from which to deal with unfamiliar topics. Another is to offer a range of options so that students can choose topics that appeal to them.

In order to find out more about self-directed learning, the final set of questions focused initially on finding out how much time learners could commit to their studies, a key factor when planning a learning system, but difficult to quantify. All respondents acknowledged the importance of high commitment but were often unable to make such a commitment. Those who did provide a specific amount of time were divided: "at least 1 or 2 hours a day if I could," "ideal is about 2 hours a week." A statement of intent to learn was recognised as being insufficient to guarantee learning. A learning programme might need to adopt some methods of maintaining learner commitment.

A comparison of the results with relevant literature reveals some points of contention. Phillipson (2009) suggested that it is a fallacy to assume that a native teacher of the language is more effective than one from a background more familiar to learners. Learners like the two respondents who suggested that the presence of English speakers was beneficial might see an advantage in having at least some opportunities to converse with native speakers. Additionally, in contrast with the remarks of one respondent on Japanese identity inhibiting English study, McSweeney (2002) found that personality does not relate to nationality. However, one survey reported that half of Japanese people feel that they will have no opportunity to use English in real life (Benesse, 2014), echoing the reported opinion of the respondent's wife and colleagues (although no respondents expressed this opinion themselves). If this view did prove to be pervasive, school management would need to find a way of persuading people not already convinced of the benefits of learning English.

Application

The interview responses suggested a range of needs. The comment of one of the respondents, "there is no right way," suggests that any institution offering only a few options to its learners might struggle to satisfy them. Bearing this in mind, from the findings presented above, I identified six guiding principles for a programme of lifelong English language learning in Japan, with the notion of flexibility being an overriding aim.

1. A Focus on Communication

The first point is that a focus on communication is needed in order to compensate for the current childhood education system. Having learned the structure of the language and some vocabulary in childhood, adult learners (including seven of the eight participants in this research) may be more interested in putting their ability to practical use, although the principle of orientation to learning (Knowles et al., 2011) suggests that this is dependent on the individual learner.

2. Contact with English Speakers From Foreign Countries

Learners may perceive a benefit in contact with people from English-speaking countries, possibly to boost authenticity. There is no evidence for an insistence on native English speakers, but the availability of fluent speakers from overseas would go some way to ensuring that learners' experiences in school would partially reflect their real world contact with the language, potentially boosting motivation and readiness to learn (Knowles et al., 2011).

3. A Variety of Courses

The amount of time available was identified as variable, depending on the speaker. This is not surprising, as learners in any such school are likely to include retirees as well as full-time workers. Courses can be stacked up in order to match the level of commitment, with learners taking classes concurrently to match their availability and needs; homework can also be utilised to maximise the amount of study time, dependent on the learner's need to know and self-concept (Knowles et al., 2011). All would provide an opportunity to introduce a more autonomous approach.

4. Well-Chosen Lesson Materials

Participants made it clear that there was value in studying both the familiar and unfamiliar when it comes to topic choice. Educators would be expected to find materials that would satisfy both, which might involve multiple texts being used simultaneously to ensure that all learners could enjoy something to match their (perceived) needs, as in the principle of learner need to know (Knowles et al., 2011).

5. Support Classes

Three respondents suggested that technology, such as computers and the Internet, could be a useful learning tool; four indicated that they struggled in this area. Therefore,

supplementary classes could be introduced in order to provide practice in areas that they may not have encountered in their childhoods, which could boost their English learning capabilities. After further research, other support classes could be considered, dedicated to areas such as autonomy or useful skills in the international working environment (presentations, debates, etc.). This could help to counter the problem of learners' needs not being met.

6. Counselling

The final point is to ensure that learner needs are being met and to keep up motivation, recognised by two participants as being a crucial factor. Regular meetings with teachers or support staff should be aimed at ensuring that students are engaged in the learning process and giving ongoing guidance as to how individuals can meet their goals. This is one way of tackling the problem of learning goals not being shared (as in McCombs, 1991).

Future Research

Despite the small sample, a key finding of this research was a large range of responses to the questions. Thus, it appears to be difficult to provide a clear sense of direction in which to guide a new school. It does indicate, however, the need for a multiplicity of options, geared to suit learners on their individual paths. Private institutions are not always able to do this to the same extent (my own experience was that learners had options regarding the size of the class but little else). It is clear that reassessment of funding would be needed to ensure the success of a new venture, including an exploration of how much money potential students are willing to pay for a tailor-made learning experience.

This exploratory study is a starting point in the establishment of a new educational programme. It needs to be followed up with a quantitative study to ensure that the learning system on offer would appeal to a large number of people. The results of the interviews could be used in order to design a questionnaire to be aimed at a large number of potential students. This questionnaire could assess respondents' feelings on the six recommendations given in the previous section and take into account other opinions expressed by participants, such as what kind of teacher they would expect. Once a school had adopted principles based on these findings, ongoing assessment could ensure the continued success of its programme and students.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to understanding of the needs of adult learners of English in Japan. Rather than through traditional methods, such as grammar translation, such learners have a desire to learn practical communication with other speakers of the language. Far from being passive receivers of a course of lessons, adult learners have opinions on what and how they want to learn. As a result, a learner-centred school would need to offer a diverse range of programmes. Despite students' stated desire to commit to any such learning system, both commitment and motivation are evidently fragile, a challenge for any institution to overcome. The participants in this study have suggested some ways to overcome such challenges. These include a communicative approach to language learning, a wide diversity of courses, a programme that will give them opportunities to interact with native or fluent speakers of English, and the use of suitably challenging material. These might suggest some of the keys for developing the capability for Japan to achieve global communication. When it comes to the possibilities for Japan to interact globally, it might be wise to observe the statement of one participant, a former learner of English in an adult learning environment: "English is a tool for communication so we need English to communicate with people."

Bio Data

Nicholas Musty is teaching at Kwansei Gakuin University and lives in Osaka. He researched the area of lifelong learning as part of his studies towards an MA in TESL/TEFL in 2014/2015. <nickmusty@yahoo.co.uk>

References

Allwright, D. (1984). Why don't learners learn what teachers teach? The interaction hypothesis. In D. M. Singleton & D. G. Little (Eds.), *Language learning in formal and informal contexts* (pp. 3-18). Dublin, Ireland: IRAAL.

Benesse. (2014). *Chukousei no eigo gakushu ni kansuru jittai chousa 2014*. [Survey related to English studies among junior high school students]. Retrieved from <http://berd.benesse.jp/up_images/research/Teenagers_English_learning_Survey-2014_ALL.pdf>

British Council. (2011). Press release. Retrieved from <https://www.britishcouncil.jp/sites/default/files/japan-about-us-press-releases-market-research-jp-20110707.pdf>

Browne, C., & Wada, M. (1998). Current issues in high school English teaching in Japan: An exploratory study. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 11*(1), 97-112.

Carless, D. R. (2003). Factors in the implementation of task-based teaching in primary schools. *System, 31,* 485-500.

Erikson, E. H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York, NY: International Universities Press.

Gorsuch, G. (2001). Japanese EFL teachers' perceptions of communicative, audiolingual and *yaku-doku* activities: The plan versus the reality. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 9*(10).

Hopkins, D. (2000). Powerful learning, powerful teaching, powerful schools. *Journal of Educational Change, 1,* 135-154.

Jarvis, P. (2004). *Adult education and lifelong learning: Theory and practice* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Routledge Falmer.

Kelly, C. H. (1999). The coming education boom: Demographic and other indicators that suggest an increase in the number of adults seeking education. *Japanese Society, 3,* 38-57.

Kelly, C. H. (2013). Adult learners and a different way of teaching. *The Language Teacher, 37*(4), 23-25.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2011). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (7th ed.). Oxford, UK: Butterworth Heinemann.

Lamb, M. (1995). The consequences of INSET. *ELT Journal, 49*(1), 72-80.

Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (2006). *How languages are learned* (3rd ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

McCombs, B. L. (1991). Motivation and lifelong learning. *Educational Psychologist, 26*(2), 117-127.

McDonough, K., & Chaikitmongkol, W. (2007). Teachers' and learners' reactions to a task-based EFL course in Thailand. *TESOL Quarterly, 41,* 107-132.

McSweeney, B. (2002). Hofstede's model of national cultural differences and their consequences: A triumph of faith—a failure of analysis. *Human Relations, 55*(1), 89-118.

Phillipson, R. (2009). *Linguistic imperialism continued*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Pratt, D. D. & Associates (1998). *Five perspectives on teaching in adult and higher education*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.

The incredible shrinking country. (2014, March 15). *The Economist*. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2014/03/japans-demography>

Wedell, M. (2003). Giving TESOL change a chance: Supporting key players in the curriculum change process. *System, 31,* 439-456.

Appendix

List of Main Questions Used in Research, by Area

1 Existing learning practices

1.1 What do you remember of the nature of studying in junior and high schools?

1.2 What do you think about these methods?

1.3 Are such methods suitable for adults?

1.4 If not, what would be better?

2 Motivation and learning

2.1 Why did you start to study English?

2.2 Has this changed? How?

2.3 What kind of situation helps to increase your motivation?

2.4 What kind of situation has a negative effect on your motivation?

2.5 What do you think is the best method of reaching your goal?

3 Experience and learning

3.1 Do you prefer to study familiar topics or something completely new? Or a mixture?

3.2 What topics do you want to study in an English lesson?

3.3 Can English lessons influence your understanding of other topics?

4 Autonomy and self-learning

4.1 How much time do you spend studying each week, with a teacher and at home?

4.2 Are you satisfied with the amount of time you spend studying?

4.3 How much study time (in class and at home) is needed to improve your level of English?