

Reflections on improving the foreign language capabilities of Japanese university students

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This brief and rather unsystematic report relates to my experience teaching an intensive course over two summers (2007 and 2008) to students in the Graduate School of Education, Tohoku University. The course included lectures on various aspects of Comparative Education (theories and methods) as well as on topics related to my specific area of expertise – education, national identity and social cohesion in the Chinese societies of East Asia (the People’s Republic, Hong Kong and Taiwan). The lectures were delivered in English, and the students were required to produce a short piece of written work which was marked and returned to them at the end of the course. The main purpose of this programme was to give students an opportunity to practise listening to English as it is used for academic purposes, with a view to building their capacity to operate confidently and effectively in an English-medium academic setting.

In this paper, I will first review my experience of the course I delivered and my perception of what the students who took it in 2008 and 2009 gained out of it. The students who took the course can in no way be considered as constituting a representative sample of Japanese university students (or even of the students at the Tohoku University Graduate School of Education – TUGSE). Any conclusions that I draw from my experience with these students must therefore be regarded as highly tentative and unreliable. However, in the second part of this report I will attempt to make some recommendations regarding ways in which students’ foreign language capabilities might be further improved. For this purpose I will also draw on my experience as a teacher of non-native speakers of English in Hong Kong during the 1990s (at high school and university level), and as a writer of English-teaching materials for high schools in Hong Kong and mainland China.

Teaching an intensive course to students at the TUGSE, 2007-8:

I understand that Japan’s Ministry of Education has in recent years launched a number of new initiatives aimed at promoting the teaching and use of English in Japanese universities

(and at other levels of the education system), as well as at ‘internationalizing’ the curriculum. I gather that such initiatives, and the funding made available by the Ministry to support them, were part of the background to the initial request made in 2007 by TUGSE to the Institute of Education (IOE) in London, asking whether a lecturer could be sent from London to Sendai for a limited period to teach a course in English to students at the Graduate School. I was grateful for the opportunity that this invitation afforded to me to spend time in Japan, since I am studying Japanese and saw the chance to combine my work at the Graduate School with a set of intensive language lessons. The remuneration offered by TUGSE was just sufficient to cover the cost of these lessons and of my living and travel expenses.

Several weeks (indeed months) before I was due to arrive in Japan in 2007, the Graduate School requested that I send a draft ‘syllabus’ for the course I was being asked to teach – which I was told should consist of fifteen lectures. The content of the lectures, it appeared, was to be almost entirely up to me. Due to teaching commitments, I was unable to spend more than about five weeks in Sendai – between late August and the end of September – so it was agreed that I would deliver all 15 lectures intensively within one week (rather than spacing them out over seven or 15 weeks). In 2008, however, I was able to schedule my visit for June-July, and to spend slightly longer in Sendai. During this second visit, I delivered a very similar series of 15 lectures, but I was able to space them out over 7 weeks (delivering two or three per week), rather than cramming them all into one week.

The timing of the course in September 2007 meant that very few undergraduate students elected to take it, so I found myself lecturing to a group of between half a dozen and ten, consisting of MA and doctoral students. Given the small size of the group, we were able to sit around tables arranged in a circular pattern in a small classroom, and the atmosphere of the classes was relatively relaxed and informal (despite the exhausting schedule cramming all lectures into one week). In the summer of 2008, by contrast, I taught a far larger group of around 20 students, this time mostly undergraduate, with just two or three MA students. Due to the size of the group, these classes took place in a regular classroom, with students sitting in rows facing the front, and me lecturing from a podium.

These differences in class size, format and composition – and in the timetabling of the sessions – contributed to significant differences between the experience of the 2007 and 2008 groups. Although getting through 15 lectures on different topics posed a great challenge to both lecturer and students, the small size of the group, the relative maturity of the students, the presence of two or three students with a relatively strong command of English, and the fact that we spent an entire week together, all contributed to a good

classroom atmosphere. The students in this first group, after some initial nervousness on the part of a few, seemed to relax more and gain a little confidence in expressing themselves as they got to know me better. Although the sessions only lasted for a week, I subsequently met up with a number of these students several times – a few came to see me in my office to discuss their work.

By contrast, many of the students in the second, larger group, who were less mature, and on average less proficient in English to begin with, and who only saw me for classes a couple of times each week, did not seem to engage as fully with the lectures. While several clearly understood most of what I said, and made some thoughtful and intelligent contributions to discussion, most remained shy and silent throughout – and many clearly had difficulties understanding the lectures. Three or four students in this group came to my office outside the sessions to discuss their work – but with one exception these were all MA students.

Many non-native speakers of English who have achieved a relatively high level of proficiency in the language still find it difficult to understand academic English – as I know, having dealt with large numbers of international students at the IOE in London. Many British or American lecturers do not speak foreign languages themselves, do not understand the difficulties faced by non-native speakers, and thus deliver their lectures to international students in precisely the same way (speaking quickly, and using many colloquialisms) as they would to an audience of native speakers. However, this was not the case with my lectures – I do speak languages other than English (and therefore know what it is like to listen to lectures in a language other than my own), and I have several years' experience of teaching non-native speakers of English. I have developed a relatively clear and measured manner of speaking to classrooms consisting of students who speak English as a second language. It is therefore safe to assume that if students have difficulty in understanding academic lectures delivered in English by someone like me, they are very unlikely to understand lectures delivered in English by anyone else. This appeared to be the case with a number of the undergraduate students who took my course in 2008 – perhaps over half of them appeared to experience very significant difficulty in following my lectures. These students may still have got something out of the course, but their foundation in the language was clearly inadequate to enable them to properly follow the lectures.

Reflections and recommendations:

While the opportunity to visit Tohoku University for an extended period (of between 6-8 weeks in my case) was very attractive to someone in my position – relatively junior, single

and, most importantly, interested in Japan and keen to learn Japanese – the terms on offer would seem far less attractive to a more senior academic with family responsibilities and no particular interest in Japan. Most academics at the IOE, for example, would be unwilling or unable, for both personal and professional reasons, to commit to spending two months away from home in Japan for the sort of financial rewards being offered. This is not to say that there may not be many others in a similar position to me (and with similar interests) who would be equally keen to take up this sort of opportunity – I think there may well be. However, the younger academics who may be keener to participate in this scheme tend to have large teaching and administrative workloads that make it difficult for them to spend long periods away from their home institution. In my case, I was obliged to spend four or five hours every day while I was in Sendai dealing with emails and other work related to my IOE responsibilities – on top of the work I was doing for the Graduate School at Tohoku University, and my daily two-hour Japanese lessons. If this sort of scheme is to be continued, then these factors should perhaps be borne in mind.

The Graduate School would evidently prefer visiting scholars invited to deliver courses in English to their students to stay longer than the 6-7 weeks I have spent in Sendai during my visits – a period of three months or more has been mentioned to me in the past. However, many institutions would allow a member of academic staff with a full teaching and administrative workload to be absent for an unbroken period of three months or more during term-time only if that individual had been granted a sabbatical. In many institutions – including the IOE – it has become more and more difficult to obtain sabbaticals in recent years, unless an external source of funding is prepared to pay full salary costs for the period for which the member of staff is absent (thus enabling the home institution to buy in extra teaching support to cover for the absent staff member). This would clearly involve a far greater expense than flying an academic over to Japan and paying his living expenses plus a fee for the lectures. In the current very difficult funding climate for UK higher education (and this probably also applies to many other countries), many academic institutions may become far more reluctant to ‘let go of’ their academics for extended periods unless the home institution is more fully reimbursed for the costs involved (i.e. salary costs in particular). However, if Japanese universities were willing and able to find the resources to fully cover these costs, and to have overseas academics visit for periods of 3-6 months, then they would be able to require the invited academics to do more teaching and/or spend more time interacting both with their students and their staff.

Although there would be many advantages – both to a Japanese university and to the invited foreign scholars (and their universities) – in a scheme that facilitated longer

exchanges of this sort, my opinion is that this sort of programme *on its own* is not going to bring about any radical improvement in the capacity of Japanese students to operate in academic English. For this goal to be achieved, there will also need to be major investment (which I believe is already happening to some extent) in foreign language teaching at all levels of the education system, along with reforms to examinations designed to incentivise and reward real command of both spoken and written language.

Promoting more student exchanges, and bringing more foreign students to study at Japanese universities, would significantly help to ‘internationalize’ campuses and might provide local students with more opportunities to gain proficiency in foreign languages. However, there has already been a large influx of Chinese students into Japan in recent years, and it is unclear whether this has played any role in prompting more Japanese students to study Chinese. Many foreign students are no doubt eager to benefit from the opportunity to study Japanese, but for exchange programmes to really get off the ground, and for local students to benefit from these, there would need to be opportunities for Japanese and overseas students to take courses together, either through the medium of Japanese, or through the medium of a foreign language such as English or Chinese. Moreover, for Japanese universities to attract significantly greater numbers of foreign students onto their degree courses – including students from outside the East Asian region – offering courses through the medium of languages other than Japanese is essential.

Japanese universities have in recent years been recruiting far more foreign faculty than in the past – and not only to teach in foreign language departments or in language centres. However, the presence and ‘visibility’ of foreign staff on many university campuses (including Tohoku University) still seems distinctly patchy. If learning to operate in a foreign language is to become an integral part of university undergraduate and graduate programmes, and if these programmes are to be fully ‘internationalized’ (in terms of opening them up to mixed classes of Japanese and foreign students), then this will require more support for students in the form of language lessons, and perhaps also a requirement to sit courses in their degree subject through the medium of a foreign language. This would require both recruiting more teachers to provide language support within universities, and more faculty able to deliver lectures in a wide range of subjects through the medium of a foreign language. These lecturers could be full, permanent, and tenured appointments, staff ‘borrowed’ from overseas universities through exchange or ‘visiting scholar’ arrangements, or perhaps staff with ‘split appointments’ (i.e. employed both by a Japanese and a foreign university, and spending part of the year in each).

If students were to be required to take one or several courses for their degree through the medium of a foreign language, they could also be given the option of taking these courses at a foreign university. This might well require significant changes to the laws and regulations governing Japanese degree programmes, but it could prove to be one of the most effective ways of promoting greater internationalization of degree programmes and providing students with opportunities to gain real command of a foreign language. A model for such an exchange programme is the European Union's Erasmus programme, which has proved very popular amongst many European universities and their students. However, attempting to teach students a foreign language once they have reached university is arguably leaving things rather too late, if they have not already achieved a reasonably solid foundation in that language while at school. Like the UK (whose students have one of the poorest rates of participation in the EU's Erasmus exchange programme), Japan has a poor record in fostering foreign language proficiency amongst school-age students, despite the fact that, unlike their British counterparts, Japanese students on average spend a great deal of time at school studying English.

The problems or issues relating to foreign language education in Japanese schools are no doubt already being researched by scholars at Tohoku University, and at other universities in Japan, and there must be many Japanese scholars who are far better placed than I am to comment on the reasons for the poor command of English achieved by most students. Nevertheless, I would hazard a guess that the nature of examinations, and particularly the all-important university entrance examinations, does not encourage students in Japan to study foreign languages in a manner that would foster the development of real proficiency. In particular, the reliance in most examinations on a multiple-choice style of testing (something seen in other East Asian education systems besides that of Japan) encourages students and teachers to focus on obscure grammatical minutiae, and mind-numbing drilling in examination technique, rather than on the building of communicative skills and confidence. Moving away from this style of testing, and standardizing university entrance examinations across Japan (so that teachers and students don't need to waste time familiarizing themselves with a maze of different testing rubrics), might help to create a climate in schools more conducive to real language learning. In addition, making oral examinations an integral and significant component of all language exams would undoubtedly help to encourage teachers and students to concentrate more on fostering the seriously neglected skill of speaking.

My final thought on the issue of Japanese students' foreign language competence is that it seems odd to me for an East Asian nation to focus so exclusively on English when it comes

to foreign language teaching and learning. English is clearly the only really global language, and seems likely to retain this status, making command of the language of crucial importance to those working in a wide range of professions, including academia. However, it seems likely that the real *lingua franca* within East Asia in the near future, as in the past, is likely to be Chinese (Mandarin) rather than (or as well as) English. Compared to their Korean counterparts, Japanese educators and students seem to have been slow to promote the learning of Chinese as a foreign language. Given the usefulness of this language within East Asia, and the fact that it is probably considerably easier for a Japanese student to study Chinese than English (due both to the simplicity of Chinese grammar and the fact that Chinese and Japanese share so many *kanji*), this is surprising. For many reasons – including the fostering of greater cross-national understanding – it might well be worth diversifying the range of foreign language options on offer to Japanese students at both school and university level, and encouraging more to study Chinese (and/or perhaps Korean), rather than purely focusing on English.