Developing Global Communication Skills

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<<Abstract>>

Due to shifts in demographics, corporate structure and hiring practices in Japan that have evolved over the past two decades, the current generation of Japanese youth is the first for whom lifelong learning has become a necessity to continued viability in the workplace. A practical approach to English language instruction must ensure that the communication skills that learners acquire in the classroom will be relevant in an increasingly globalized workplace. In order to develop communicative competence in English prior to graduation from university, it is crucial for students to focus on four

key components: language relevancy, effective presentation skills, learner autonomy, and career development. Moreover, learners' efforts to develop English proficiency must be recognized and rewarded. This article summarizes key points of a presentation entitled, "Developing Global Communication Skills" which was given at the ETJ English Teaching Expo at Kanda Institute of Foreign Studies in Tokyo on 3 November 2013 and also highlights recent English educational initiatives proposed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

1. Introduction

While lifelong learning has come to play an increasingly important role in both developed and developing economies over the past 40 years, this has not necessarily been the case in Japan due, in part, to lifetime employment, the seniority system, and excellent on the job training for new employees. However, due to shifts in demographics, corporate structure and hiring practices in Japan that have evolved over the past two decades amid a sluggish economy compounded by a global recession, and the impact of factors such as globalization and ICT advances, the current generation of Japanese youth is the first for whom lifelong learning has become a necessity to continued viability in the workplace.

Although university students are beginning to realize that graduates today face challenges that would have been unimaginable for their parents' generation, many still seem relatively unaware of what awaits them if they graduate or begin job-hunting without having acquired specialized skills, gained work experience, obtained qualifications, and developed a level of English proficiency necessary to meet the needs of prospective employers. How can we, as university educators, foster learner autonomy and promote lifelong learning in order to empower students to confront current challenges and prepare for those posed by an

uncertain future? A practical approach to English language instruction must ensure that the communication skills that learners acquire in the classroom will be relevant in an increasingly globalized workplace.

Consider the case of a highly-motivated university student who, after having taken 23 English courses at the post-secondary level, was quite proficient in English and was hired by an IT firm in Tokyo. He began work soon after graduation, and not surprisingly, he often used English in his job. However, he quickly realized that the English that he needed at work was very different from the English that he had studied in most of his university classes. This mismatch between language acquired in the classroom and language needed in the workplace seems a blatant (and costly) waste of students' time and energy at a point when Japanese companies sorely need employees who possess global communication skills in order to bolster efforts to regain Japan's economic dynamism. How is it possible to close this gap? What language skills are required in order for students to make a smooth and successful transition from classroom to career?

2. Motivating students through educational reform

Over the past decade, ambitious educational initiatives adopted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology have focused on raising the English proficiency levels of Japanese students from elementary school to high school. These include the "Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" (MEXT, 2003), the "Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education" (MEXT, 2008), and "Five Proposals and Specific Measures for Developing Proficiency in English for International Communication" (MEXT, 2011) The last, for example, calls for using external certification tests to assess English proficiency levels of both teachers and students, modifying English entrance exams to focus more on communicative skills, and exempting prospective students from taking English

entrance exams if they demonstrate English proficiency on the basis of external certification test scores.

The "Execution Plan for Reform of English Education in Response to Globalization," released by the Education Ministry in December 2013, stipulates that English instruction is to begin from 3rd grade in activity-based classes. In 5th and 6th grades, English will become an official subject, with classes taught three times a week by qualified teachers or language instructors (MEXT, 2013). Professor Emiko Yukawa of Ritsumeikan University endorses the reform plan, noting that the self-consciousness which develops among 5th and 6th graders makes activity-based instruction more appropriate in lower grades (Kameda 2013).

Citing results of a survey, conducted by the Education Ministry in 2012, regarding the impact of English instruction at the elementary level, which began in 2011, Helga Tabuchi, Director of the Office for Promoting Foreign Language Education in MEXT's Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau, found that a majority of the junior high school teachers surveyed had observed benefits, including improvement in listening comprehension and willingness to communicate in English, among students who had participated in English language instruction during elementary school (Kameda 2013; MEXT, 2012a).

Research in the field of second language acquisition also suggests that an early start is preferable. DeKeyser (2000), in referring to the 'Critical Period Hypothesis'—which considers the effects of age-related factors on language acquisition—asserts, "Somewhere between the ages of 6-7 and 16-17, everybody loses the mental equipment required for the implicit induction of the abstract patterns underlying a human language" (as cited in Dornyei, 2009, p. 241). Thus, delaying the process of second language acquisition may, in effect, complicate the task by narrowing the window during which children and adolescents possess the greatest capacity for learning a foreign language.

Other English education reforms set targets for secondary and post-secondary education. According to Education Minister Hakubun Shimomura, one objective

is to "raise the standards for English education at the junior high and high school levels by having teachers conduct classes in English in junior high school, and focusing on the presentation and debate aspects of English usage in high school" (Kodera 2013; MEXT, 2013). Developing proficiency in these language skills would greatly enhance a learner's ability to acquire communicative competence in English prior to entering university.

Furthermore, an ambitious plan targeting post-secondary reform, "Higher Education in Japan," calls for the internationalization of Japanese universities in order to attract 300,000 international students by 2020 and provide more opportunities for Japanese students to take courses in English (MEXT, 2012b).

> Amid ongoing globalization, in order to develop an educational environment where Japanese people can acquire the necessary English skills and also international students can feel at ease to study in Japan, it is very important for Japanese universities to conduct lessons in English for a certain extent, or to develop courses where students can obtain academic degrees by taking lessons conducted entirely in English (MEXT, 2012b, p. 17).

Moreover, this reform plan outlines measures to designate and develop 30 Japanese universities as "centers for internationalization". Tokyo University, Kyoto University, Keio University, Waseda University, Sophia University, Doshisha University, and Ritsumeikan University are among the universities that have been selected to form the "Global 30" (MEXT, 2012b, p. 18). The implementation of such far-reaching reforms could have enormous potential to revitalize English education in Japan.

3. Developing communicative competence

After six to nine years of English instruction prior to entering university, students should have acquired a solid foundation in the language. Thus, at the university level, instead of reviewing grammatical structures, functional language, familiar topics and vocabulary covered at the secondary level, a more effective approach to English language instruction would be to focus on learning vocabulary and expressions that would be relevant in a business context and to gain proficiency in business communications skills, while recycling language and communication strategies previously acquired. Moreover, to increase students' motivation and maximize their potential to acquire communicative competence in English prior to graduation from university, it is crucial to focus on four key components: language relevancy, effective presentation skills, learner autonomy, and career development.

3.1 Language relevancy

After taking required English courses during their first two years at university, many students opt to take courses related to their major or ones that will fulfill other graduation requirements rather than continuing to study English. Thus, if the textbooks and instructional materials used in required English courses focus primarily on general English language skills, many university students will have no opportunity to acquire language skills relevant to the workplace prior to graduation.

To better prepare university graduates for the challenges of job-hunting and the demands of working in a global society, students in required English courses should acquire relevant vocabulary, language expressions, and communication skills and should gain proficiency in using them in business contexts. This could include practicing telephone skills role playing job interviews and other business-related situations, participating in case studies, reading and discussing business-related news articles, doing team projects such as selecting a venue for an

international conference or planning a tour of Tokyo for international visitors, and researching companies, global business trends, business innovation, etc. for group or individual presentations. If students experience a significant gain in their English proficiency and realize the benefits of acquiring language skills relevant to the workplace during their first two years at university, they may opt to continue developing their communicative competence in English throughout their academic careers. This supposition is supported by Professor Nobuyuki Honna's (2008) observations in *English as a Multicultural Language in Asian Contexts: Issues and Ideas.*

> Events that are indicative of a change in traditional Japanese attitudes toward English are occurring in the business sections of Japanese society. Participants in in-service seminars, provided by blue-chip companies during or after their work hours, generally report that knowledge of English as a multicultural language really helps them understand what they can do with English at international settings. It further motivates them to work harder to improve their abilities for more effective communication (p. 174).

3.2 Effective presentation skills

Due, in part, to advances in information and communication technology, making presentations has become fundamental to doing business globally. According to employees taking Business English classes at companies in Tokyo, one of the most expedient ways to get a promotion in many Japanese companies today is by making PowerPoint presentations in English. Thus, by developing effective presentation skills, university students can add a valuable tool to their job-hunting toolbox.

However, many high school graduates have never made a speech in front of their peers in Japanese or in English, so doing so seems a daunting task. Stage fright can reduce many hours of planning and practice to a few grueling moments

of fear and failure. How is it possible for students to gain confidence and develop the skills required to make a successful presentation? By approaching the task through a series of incremental steps, students can develop the requisite skills and techniques and gain proficiency through practice and repetition. These steps include giving "impromptu" speeches, making group presentations, and doing peer interviews.

Short "impromptu" speeches or mini-speeches provide an opportunity for students to talk briefly(1-2 mins.) about a familiar topic of their own choosing such as part-time jobs, club activities, hometowns, hobbies, trips etc. This task is done as an ungraded practice activity, which relieves the performance anxiety associated with an assessed task. The stated purpose of the activity is for students to practice making eye contact while speaking without notes. Another objective is for students to get through the initial bout of stage fright before making their first "real" presentation. To provide additional scaffolding, students may practice their mini-speech with a partner one or more time(s) prior to making the speech in front of the class.

The next step is to make a group or team presentation. Students choose their partner(s), and they select a topic to research and then prepare a PowerPoint presentation together. It is important for all students to be involved in both making the slides and writing the speech for their presentation in order to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills. Students may again have an opportunity to practice their presentation with their partner(s) in class prior to making the actual presentation.

The final step in the process involves doing peer interviews. In groups of three to five, students interview a classmate about an experience such as studying abroad or doing a homestay, doing an internship or part-time job, participating in a club activity, volunteering, etc. Students prepare their questions prior to doing the task and are also encouraged to ask follow up questions during the interviews. Because the interviewees are describing their own experiences, the task does not require much prior preparation on their part. These interviews serve to prepare

students for the Q&A part of their final presentation and may also provide valuable information about opportunities that some might wish to explore during their academic careers.

By going through this process, students have given two speeches, learned to make PowerPoint slides, given a PowerPoint presentation with their partner(s), and have practiced doing Q&A sessions prior to making their individual presentations. These steps allow students to build confidence and gain proficiency in making effective presentations. To further develop their presentation skills, students can also watch model presentations, analyze elements of recorded speeches, and record and critique their own presentations with a partner.

3.3 Learner autonomy

In addition to improving their English proficiency and developing effective presentation skills, it is crucial for students today to become more autonomous in their approach to learning. Due to changes in corporate structure and hiring practices in Japan and the impact of factors such as globalization and ICT advances, students must become more actively engaged in their own learning process and realize the important role of lifelong learning in maintaining their viability in the workplace. It is no longer realistic to expect that a future employer will offer lifetime employment or provide on the job training for unskilled workers. In order to develop the skills and acquire the knowledge and experience necessary to survive and thrive in an ever-changing global society, university students must become better prepared to direct their own learning process both during and after their academic careers.

One way to foster learner autonomy in the classroom is by providing students with more choices and more opportunities to become involved in decision-making processes that affect both the content and structure of what they are learning. Giving students options, for example, in choosing research topics, selecting news articles to be used for class activities, leading group discussions, determining the format of projects or presentations, etc. stimulates students' interest, engages their

participation, and encourages them to take initiative and play a more active role in their own learning process.

Experiential learning also serves to promote learner autonomy. For example, interviewing guest speakers and organizing field trips are excellent ways to extend learning beyond the classroom. However, cost and logistics can limit the feasibility of such activities. An alternative is for students to interview someone outside of class and share what they have learned with their peers through class presentations. This type of activity allows a student to take charge of many aspects of the learning experience such as selecting an interviewee, arranging a time and place for the interview, preparing interview questions, and conducting the interview. An interview project is a challenging endeavor, which requires adequate preparation prior to doing the actual task. This could involve interviewing the teacher or a guest speaker, doing peer interviews, or preparing their questions for the interview project and role playing their interviews with a partner in class. In addition, having students complete an interview planning questionnaire and checking their progress periodically are practical means of ensuring that students take the appropriate steps to arrange, organize and conduct their interviews in a timely manner in order to successfully complete the project.

Providing opportunities for students to reflect on and assess their own learning is another way to develop autonomous learning. An example of this is the use of portfolio assessment. Students are responsible for compiling and submitting work that they have completed for a particular course. In addition, students prepare a "Self-assessment of Learning" in which they summarize what they have learned in the course, indicate which aspects of the course were challenging, describe what they did to overcome the challenges, comment briefly on specific tasks completed in the course, and explain how their learning in the course could be beneficial in the future. Through this process, students are able to review the body of work that they have produced, evaluate their own efforts and achievements, and recognize the progress that they have made.

3.4 Career development

Many university students today find themselves "caught" in a transition between the expectations of their parents' generation, (i.e., university admission virtually guaranteed lifetime employment) and the challenges facing their own generation who can no longer rely on a future employer to determine their career path and provide the necessary training. Thus, it is crucial for individuals to focus more on career development and to take initiative in acquiring knowledge, developing skills, and gaining experience that will enable them to pursue a career path of their own choosing. Despite a highly-competitive job market, however, many Japanese university students wait until their junior year to begin focusing on possible careers, thereby limiting the time that they have to obtain qualifications, gain work experience, acquire IT skills, and improve their English proficiency.

In order to motivate students to focus on career development earlier in their academic careers, first-year students could be encouraged to consult career counselors, complete career interest surveys, and consider a variety of career options. In addition, tasks related to career development can be adapted for use in various teaching contexts. For example, students can complete a "Career Development Questionnaire" (see appendix). Based on their responses to the questionnaire, students design a career plan and can also create an ideal curriculum vitae that they would like to have when they start job-hunting. Furthermore, students can participate in various goal-setting tasks related to their future career aspirations. For example, they can interview someone who has achieved one or more of their goals, (e.g., studying abroad, doing a homestay, volunteering, doing an internship, etc.) and make class presentations to share the information with their peers. In addition, students can interview 4th-year students about the job-hunting process, research job-hunting tips and job interview techniques online, and role play job interviews in class. Tasks such as these, which provide opportunities for students to focus on their future and set career-related goals, can serve to motivate them to acquire communicative competence in English and take appropriate steps to prepare

for job-hunting, thereby maximizing the benefits of their academic careers.

4. Incentivizing English proficiency

While students' English proficiency and communicative competence can improve considerably by engaging in tasks and projects such as those described in previous sections, their efforts often go unrecognized and unrewarded, thereby undermining their motivation. At the university level, the practice of "streaming,"(i.e., the placement of students in level-appropriate English classes), has been adopted by many Japanese universities, and while this represents an improvement over the large, multi-level classes that were commonplace a decade ago, it is only an initial step toward meaningful reform. In some cases, streaming may actually be viewed as disadvantageous for students in advanced-level classes.

Such students must work much harder, using textbooks and course materials that are more challenging than those used by students in basic level classes. On their university transcripts however, both basic and advanced-level students receive credit for having taken the same course. Thus, they may receive "A" or "B" or "C" in first or second-year required English courses, but these grades generally fail to indicate differences in the class level and requirements for a given course. Consequently, two students with widely varying levels of English proficiency could both receive a "B" grade, for example, for a required English course with the same course title, despite the fact that the course contains very different content and requirements, depending on the level of the class. As a result, such grades fail to adequately reflect differences in students' English proficiency levels and so appear ambiguous to potential employers.

Rather than streaming all students into different levels of the same required English courses during their first two years, English placement test scores could be used to place first-year students in one of four required

English courses, (e.g., English 101, English 102, English 103 and English 104). Basic level students would place into English 101 and would take all four courses over four semesters. However, students who placed into English 103 or English 104 would be able to complete required courses during their first year and could then take more advanced-level courses. In other words, such students would be allowed to skip or "place out of " some, or all, of the required courses. This would provide motivation for high school students to acquire an intermediate level of English proficiency prior to entering university. Furthermore, for potential employers, this system would provide a much clearer indication of a job candidate's level of English proficiency, thus creating an incentive for students to improve their English communication skills throughout their academic careers. Moreover, motivating learners in these ways to engage in and direct their own learning process in order to achieve their goals serves to develop learner autonomy and forms the basis of lifelong learning.

5. Conclusion

During the period of Japan's economic boom, university admission virtually guaranteed lifetime employment. Consequently, English education at the high school level focused primarily on grammar translation in order to prepare students for English entrance examinations. Due, however, to shifts in corporate structure and hiring practices ensuing a prolonged economic downturn, university graduates today are entering a highly competitive job market and can no longer expect the promise of job security, enjoyed by their parents' generation. Furthermore, the challenges that they are facing have been compounded by the impact of a global recession and a rapidly expanding trend toward globalization. These factors have focused attention on the need to restructure English education to enable Japanese companies to compete more effectively in the global economy. Over the past

decade, far-reaching educational initiatives have been proposed and meaningful reforms are now being implemented, which will serve to boost the English proficiency of high school graduates. In addition, incentivizing English proficiency at the post-secondary level will further increase students' motivation by recognizing and rewarding their efforts.

In order to develop global communication skills, it is crucial for university students to acquire and gain proficiency in using English language skills that are relevant to the workplace. This includes developing effective presentation skills, which are essential to doing business globally. Moreover, by focusing on career development throughout their university experience, students will be more apt to develop the skills, acquire the knowledge and gain the experience needed to succeed in job-hunting. Finally, fostering learner autonomy and promoting the concept of lifelong learning will serve to ensure that individuals can remain competitive in their chosen fields. Ultimately, through the implementation of educational reforms aimed at boosting English proficiency and developing global communication skills, individuals will be able to participate more fully in the global community, which could, in turn, serve to fuel an economic recovery that would benefit Japanese society as a whole.

Appendix: Career Development Questionnaire

Consider the questions below and design a career plan. (10~20 years)

1) What kind of qualifications, licenses, degrees, and/or experience do you want to obtain before you graduate?
2) What level of English proficiency do you want to have before you start job-hunting? (e.g. TOEIC or TOEFL score)
3) Do you want to go to graduate school? If so, what degree would you like to obtain? When and where would you like to study?
4) Do you want to study abroad or do a homestay? If so, when and where would you like to go?

5) Would you like to do an internship? If so, when and where would you like to work?

6) Do you want to travel or work abroad, (e.g. working holiday visa, volunteer), before you graduate? If so, when and where would you like to go?

7) What kind of company do you want to work for? Why?
   · Japanese company in Japan or abroad
   · International company in Japan or abroad
   · Self-employed (own company)

8) Where would you like to work?

9) What kind of position do you want to have?

10) What are your top priorities in selecting a company and a position?

11) Would you prefer to work for a small, medium-size, or large company?

12) Would you like to work for a company that has flexible working hours? Why (not)?

13) If you have a child, would you want to take maternity/paternity leave? Why (not)?

14) How long do you want to stay with the same company?

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