

Text-based Pedagogy Using Twitter in Japanese English Education: A Pilot Study

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Present situation of English education in Japan

The average Japanese university student has been studying English for about eight years after entering junior high school at the age of 12. Eight years of English study is not a short period of time, but most students cannot acquire a good command of English even after the load of competitive study for the entrance examinations. It is often said that this is because the Japanese English teaching system in high schools focuses mostly on reading and writing skills, with less emphasis placed on listening and speaking skills. In addition, some allocate partial blame to Japanese culture: Speech is silver, silence is golden. These doctrines may hold truths, but these are not complete illustrations of the whole picture of Japanese students who study English at high schools and universities. One piece of the evidence is that many of the Japanese university students cannot express themselves or describe their everyday routines in written English, let alone in spoken English. Most of them hesitate to speak and write in English in their university English classes. Even when they express themselves in English, their expressions are extremely poor and naive. However, after having studied English for more than eight years, as noted above, students can read pretty difficult English stories and news articles. They certainly should have considerable vocabulary to express themselves in English.

Necessity of much more exposure to English outside of class

The Japanese population is about 127 million, and the Japanese-speaking population is also about the same. Japan is, as it were, a monolingual society. This number of mother-tongue (first-language) speakers is the ninth largest in the world (Crystal, 2007, p.465). Japanese people can read books of almost any field from fiction to academic theories only in Japanese. We can talk about things from everyday events to theoretical physics without relying on English or other foreign languages. That is to say, Japanese can live without the need to use English in our daily life. This might become the biggest obstacle to learning English in Japan. Necessity is a powerful weapon and effective medicine. If the number of the Japanese-speaking population were much smaller than the present situation and a variety of information can be accessed only in English, we would have to learn English with much more serious mindsets and most would acquire a higher command of English.

What should we do in this situation where we do not need to use English? The number of English classes at universities is extremely small. For example, in the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Tokushima, three English classes are offered to the freshmen and two classes to the sophomores. Each class consists of sixteen 90-minute classes in a semester. That is, only 120 hours of English classes are needed for the students to graduate from the university. Nobody will think these hours of study are sufficient for the Japanese university students to gain a good command of English. This concludes that it is essentially important for the English teachers of Japanese universities to figure out a natural and functional way students could gain exposure to English much more in their daily life outside of the English classes.

Pilot of context-based English education with Twitter and its advantage

As mentioned above, most Japanese students do not need to use English in their everyday life because they can communicate with each other and get information about almost any field in only Japanese. In this situation, the English teachers in Japan should make up mock stories for our students to use English. To ask the students to study English much harder or to give them lots of homework would not be a happier solution. It will be burdensome for them and they will get bored with such assignments. We should work out more natural and less burdensome ways the students would expose themselves to English.

I came up with the idea that conducting a monologue in English is an easiest way to use English. We do not need a partner to communicate with. We do not need to go to a certain place or a classroom at a certain time. We can murmur to ourselves at any time of the day or night. One problem of this murmuring method is that they do not have incentives to speak to themselves. If nobody responds, they would not like to keep murmuring in English. Is there any good solution? Making the most use of Twitter (<http://twitter.com/>) may be one of the answers to this question.

We invited English class students, at the beginning of the semester, to tweet only in English almost every day. They were allowed to tweet at any time at any place by using computers or cellphones. They could tweet about any topic, from personal events to public affairs, but only in English. As an incentive measure, I told them that the degree of involvement in this activity would affect their score. They could share each other's tweets by using *hashtag* which I defined, and their tweets could be monitored and tallied by Twilog (<http://twilog.org/>).

At the end of the semester, I had a questionnaire concerning this activity. Some of the questions and the replies are indicated in the following:

S1. This activity has lowered my resistance toward expressing myself in English.

Completely true of me: 13.3%

Usually true of me: 6.7%

Somewhat true of me: 13.3%

Usually not true of me: 60.0%

Never true of me: 6.7%

N/A: 0.0%

S2. This activity is effective to improve my English skills.

Completely true of me: 26.7%

Usually true of me: 33.3%

Somewhat true of me: 33.3%

Usually not true of me: 6.7%

Never true of me: 0.0%

N/A: 0.0%

Statement 1 (S1) and its replies show that one-third of the students felt tweeting in English almost every day had lowered their resistance toward expressing themselves in English. S2 shows that conducting a monologue in English has possibilities to help them improve their English skills. Most definitely, this kind of activity alone is insufficient in improving the students' command of English, but under the circumstances where using English is not necessary to go through life, I would like to insist that the teacher of English should create a mock situation like this where the students have to use English in their daily life.

Reference

Crystal, D. (Ed.). (2007). *The penguin factfinder* (3rd ed). London: Penguin Books.