

Voices from the Classroom: Teachers' and Students' Perspectives on How Spoken English is Taught in High Schools

Dan Ednie ¹⁾

1) The Asia Institute, The University of Melbourne

Abstract: Today, despite six years of schooling and access to native speakers through the JET program, Japanese high school students are graduating without enough oral proficiency to hold basic conversations in English. The present study draws on qualitative data from past teachers and students of English in Japanese high schools in order to examine why oral proficiency is so weak. The interviews focused on four key areas of speaking in Japanese schools: individual motivation, utilization (or not) of ALTs in the school, the notion of the introduction of a speaking test at university entrance exams and the value of paired conversation practice in class. The data collected in the present study, in line with the relevant literature, suggest that speaking is the lowest priority for teachers and learners because it is difficult to evaluate and generally unnecessary for the lives of Japanese people. However, generational differences concerning beliefs about the importance of communicative competence are evident in the interviews, suggesting that future generations of Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) will operate under different assumptions about English.

Introduction

The current approach to English teaching in Japanese senior and junior high schools consists of six hours per week of English instruction for the full six years of students' secondary education. Beginning officially in 2011, MEXT has extended the teaching of English to the 5th and 6th graders of elementary schools. While the National English curriculum covers all four aspects of English proficiency (speaking, listening, writing, reading), the emphasis is on written and translation proficiency, rather than oral and communicative competence (Kitao et al 1985, Kamada 1997). Teaching, particularly in the final year of high school, is focused toward grammar and translation proficiency, (*yakudoku*), as these are the abilities that are under the most scrutiny when students take their university entrance exams (Kikuchi 2009, Kubota 2011).

Numerous studies have shown that of the four major proficiency categories, speaking is consistently the least developed in Japanese high school graduates (Kamada 1997, Ochi 1999). The dissimilarity of Japanese speakers' first language affects the rate of students' lexico-grammatical proficiency (Gabriele & Canales 2011) as well as discourse and pragmatic proficiency (Baba 2010) of the target language English. However, this negative

*) Contact : Rm241, The Asia Institute, Sidney Myer Asia Centre, The University of Melbourne, Parkville 3010, VIC, Australia daniel.ednie@unimelb.edu.au

L1 transfer is not unique to Japan.

Kwan (2002) reflected on the scores of Japanese students in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as being the lowest in Asia, beating only North Korea. However, this relative lack of proficiency can be seen as an anomaly in the otherwise well-resourced and comprehensive education system (McConnell 2006). If not on account of a significant L1 interference, or a lack of funding, the reasons for the present English speaking deficiency must lie elsewhere. The present study seeks to elicit some of these reasons through an analysis of ex-teachers' and students' perceptions of the English curriculum.

Motivation

Motivation in Japanese learners of English has been investigated extensively. Kikuchi (2009) elicited student responses to identify the specific causes of demotivation. Causes of demotivation include: the emphasis on memorization, tests and university entrance exams and use of the grammar-translation method. The literature has suggested a number of obstacles to students improving their motivation to learn English, and the theme of a lack of opportunity to communicate meaningfully in English is common to many.

Kamada's (1989) study found that classroom teachers' use of oral English correlates with higher student self-evaluations, self-esteem and motivation. Classes that focused only on grammar and translation and classes that had both grammar translation and oral learning had similar test scores. However, classrooms that focused on both aspects of English had greater levels of motivation and were positively stimulated to study English on their own.

Due to the high level of stress involved for high school students preparing to take university entrance examinations, practical needs dictate that students are trained in test-taking skills (Akiyama 2003,

Kamada 1993). This goal has ensured that the majority of class time is spent working towards success in listening, reading and writing sections, at the expense of speaking (Ibid). This purely "instrumental" approach has long been recognized as reducing students' motivation to learn (Condry & Chambers 1978, Kikuchi 2009).

Proponents of speaking tests being introduced into university entrance exams have been met with counter-arguments. The major reason is cited by Akiyama (2003) who explains that practical constraints of administering speaking tests are one of the greatest obstacles to the inclusion of a speaking component in university entrance exams. A potential barrier which is relevant to Japan, is the concern of assessment. Tokumoto & Shibata (2011) found that Japanese EFL learners are reluctant to speak English with their L1 accent, which inhibits speech production at the learning stage. Moreover, Nikos (2007) showed how non-native EFL teachers' own self-doubts about their effects their ability to instruct and assess reliably and accurately. Rather than suffering from a lack of ability to teach, lack of self-confidence and the inferiority complex of not being a native speaker affected their performance. In a worst case scenario, Japanese learners of English who become EFL teachers may maintain this negativity towards their L1 accent, and as a result feel less confident about their ability to teach students spoken English.

Role of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs)

Since 1987 the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) program has grown from 848 participants from four countries to more than five thousand participating college graduates from forty-one countries today (Shibata 2010). Acting primarily as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), the participants need not have formal qualifications as English teachers, but rather act as aides to the Japanese teachers. The

program was launched in 1987 under the Nakasone administration in a move to 'internationalise' Japan, and came following growing international criticism of Japan as being a 'closed' society (McConnell 1996). The program has been supported with funding of approximately US \$300 million annually, and dispatches ALTs to the vast majority of the country's 16,000 high schools (ibid.).

Despite the value of the initiative in terms of bridging and developing greater international ties, issues have arisen in terms of how well ALTs contribute to the classroom. Shibata (2010) outlined issues to do with distrust Japanese teachers feel of non-native speaking ALTs. Moreover, Crump (2007) argued that the one week of training upon arrival in Tokyo is insufficient for untrained teachers to serve the educational needs to their students.

McConnell (1996) concluded that while the foreign policy goals of the program are consistently met, ALTs are often in direct competition with regular teachers for legitimacy, and 'the gap between the ideal of teaching conversational English and the reality of the entrance exams remains an acute contradiction' (p.455). Moreover, at the local level, both bureaucrats and school administrators attempt to subvert the value of the ALTs by deliberately excluding them from staff social events. ALTs reflected on switching schools for the day to show that they are being used as 'human tape recorders' and were thus 'exchangeable parts' (p.453).

Speaking Tests in Japan

Currently, students' ability to speak English is the only skill not required to enter into a top university. This has an influence on how much time teachers can spend working on developing students capabilities in high school. It also restricts Japanese adults from traveling overseas, who are unable to communicate in English. While the cost, both in

terms of time and money, is recognized by both bureaucrats and academics (McNamara 2000), the potential benefit of increased incentives for high school teachers to teach students to speak must also be taken into consideration. Currently, as the imperative to teach to the university entrance exams is so strong that it dominates the senior high school curriculum, particularly in the final year of students' high school education (Brown and Yamashita 1995, Kikuchi 2006).

Rea-Dickins & Rixon (1997) make the point that if there is a discrepancy between the goals of the curriculum, and the constructs of the tests, then this sends the wrong message to teachers and students. In consequence, the absence of a speaking test in the entrance exams voids all other reasons to spend class time on developing that aspect of English proficiency.

As an interpretation of the exclusion of speaking from Japanese tests, Kamada (2002) argues that dating back over a millennium, at the inception of foreign language education in Japan, accessing the wisdom of written texts has been the sole goal of foreign language education. This approach can still be seen today in the structure and focus of the entrance exams, which place primary emphasis on reading and writing skills. Despite this focus, Japanese students' reasons for wanting to study English are changing, as they increasingly "reject being pressured to excel and compete in school" and as such are pursuing studies out of interest rather than the desire for material gain.

As a pilot study, Akiyama (2003) carried out speaking tests for entrants into a senior high school in Tokyo, which was taken by 219 applicants. Drawing on Bachman & Palmer's (1996) notion of "usefulness", Akiyama analysed the speaking test in terms of its reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact and practicality (p.119). Teacher interviews revealed that the attitude of

many teachers was to dismiss carrying out direct speaking tests because they were able to assess students' speaking proficiency during classes throughout the year. Eighty per cent of teachers responded that if speaking tests were included, this would lead to greater levels of emphasis on communication in class, and that this would be a positive change. However, Akiyama argues:

... the inclusion of speaking tests could be one of the ways to bridge the gap between aims of the guidelines and the content of teaching, and between the content of teaching and assessment practice (2003: 129).

Akiyama's study recommends that the potential for inter-rater unreliability must be considered in conjunction with the increased 'authenticity' of the curriculum as a whole, i.e. adding the speaking test forces classrooms to develop practical communicative strategies which can be used when speaking to non-Japanese speakers in the future.

Paired and Group Discussions

Paired and group discussions in class enable teachers to maximize students' production of English. Since Kramsh (1986), classrooms embracing "interactional competence" have progressively moved away from purely teacher centered instruction, towards balancing student to student interaction with traditional forms of instruction.

Japanese classrooms have taken on paired and group discussions as a way of improving students' spoken proficiency of English. Bradford-Watts (2011) details lesson plans and the value of peer teaching, which involves students developing their own language use games, with an emphasis on the active negotiation of meaning. Bradford-Watts suggests limiting teaching from the textbook to twenty minutes of total lesson time, and leaving up to forty

minutes for students to use the grammar and vocabulary in small groups.

Negishi (2010) analyses the meaning negotiation strategies used by high school and university age Japanese learners of English. The study shows that exposure to co-constructed discussion, in small groups (three interlocutors) improves students communicative competence. While focusing only on language in use will lead to communication breakdowns, teaching grammar alone will not replace knowledge of negotiation strategies such as asking for information, asking for help and modifying and developing the topic. Negishi recommends that grammar and practical use of English be introduced in a balanced way, giving students adequate opportunity to use the grammar and vocabulary they have learnt.

Shibata (2010) identifies one of the reasons why paired activities are not taken up more pervasively by Japanese educators. This is expressed by Shibata (2010) as stemming from the belief that the goal of ESL and EFL learners is to acquire only a native speaker's pronunciation and overall linguistic knowledge. Thus, interaction between speakers of Japanese in English is seen as counter-productive, and harming students' chances of developing a high level of English proficiency in the future.

Methodology

The present study seeks to map the reactions and opinions of both educators and learners within the system, and in conjunction with the available literature, from preliminary recommendations. These recommendations focus on how the quality of high school graduates spoken English could be improved. The data collected consists of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews between the researcher and the participants. In total, participants consisted of 6 teachers, and 8 students. This data is supported by classroom observations of university English classes,

and a number of unrecorded informal conversations.

All participants have either been high school teachers of English, or studied English in a Japanese high school. All interviews took place at Tohoku University in Sendai, Japan during the author's sabbatical at the Centre for the Advancement of Higher Education (CAHE) in January and February 2012. Interviews were either face to face, or answered via email. All participants' names have been changed for confidentiality, and they were fully informed of the nature and goals of the research prior to participation.

Interviews have been transcribed for pauses and code switches, however micro-level conversation-analysis style transcription has not been undertaken. Laughter is represented by (laugh), and for a short pause (less than 1 second) "..." is used, longer pauses are represented with "[pause 3s]". In the transcripts, R: is the researcher, and the first letter of the interviewee's name are included, e.g. Keisuke is "K". Interviews took place either completely in English, or in a mix of Japanese and English. Translated responses are italicized.

Data Analysis

The present analysis will delineate the various perspectives encountered in the course of the interviews. While not all respondents' contributions are analysed in all sections, the following is an overview of teachers and students perspectives of how motivation, ALTs, speaking tests and paired work are currently treated and the discourses that underlie the way that English speaking is taught in Japan.

"Japanese can't speak English to other Japanese"

One of the most dominant perspectives encountered among both teachers and students was that "Japanese can't speak English to other Japanese". The following excerpt is from Keisuke

(35), a retired English teacher who taught for six years.

R: When the Japanese students have pair work? What is that like?

K: That's good, I think.

R: Is there any problem with it?

K: *The best thing about it is that the time for speaking is going to really grow. They can use a lot of English. That said though, no matter what, Japanese people will feel embarrassed using English, the two of them, whichever one is most embarrassed, the conversation will end there. So the teacher's expectation is important for them to recover and continue.*

The belief that Japanese people, and in particular students, are unwilling to communicate in English, was also expressed another Japanese interviewee Shizuka (20) in the excerpt below.

R: Did you speak English?

S: Uhuh, usually in English class I don't speak English with my friends. I speak English with the teachers.

R: So you spoke English with the ALT?

S: Yes.

R: And English with your Japanese teacher?

S: Probably no... (laugh).

Initially the spoken interaction in English is defined as between teachers, but upon further questioning, Shizuka explains that actually English was only used with the ALT. Later in the interview, Shizuka puts forward the suggestion that all classes should be taught entirely in English. As one of participants most supportive of more speaking in class, Shizuka's lack of interest in speaking to other English learners is unexpected. The apparent conflict between wanting more opportunities to speak, but not

wanting to speak to other students was also held by a number of interviewees.

The other participant who suggested all classes should be taught in English was Wataru (20). He explains that they had speaking class twice a week in the first and second years of senior high school, and that there were fifteen minutes of each of those classes devoted to pair work.

R: Did you speak in the class?

W: So little. There are many people in class, mmm, so I can't speak English so much.

Despite pair work being available, he doesn't perceive the activity as a 'chance' to speak English. He comments on the large class sizes, arguing that the number of students in the class impacts on the number of chances to speak English.

The majority of student and teacher participants claimed that having adequate chances to speak English was important. With only two exceptions though, all participants had been involved in pair work where all members of the class are required to speak English together. Due to the strength of the discourse that it's not possible for Japanese to communicate together in English, this pair work, and the discussions that take place, are not considered by students to be opportunities to speak English. In turn, the students see the lack of opportunity to speak English as restricting their level of speaking proficiency.

"Japanese English teachers can't evaluate students' speech"

When asked as to why speaking is not included in University entrance exams, one of the major reasons given was that evaluation of speaking is difficult.

R: Do you think it's possible if you know how to evaluate, to have a speaking test?

K: The problem is the Japanese. Japanese person test to Japanese people, evaluate Japanese students, I think it's the problem.

R: How can we change this?

K: Interviewer is native speaker.

R: So generally Japanese teachers in the entrance exam, they can or can't speak English?

K: Not, mmm, many can do that, but many Japanese do that. But for students, students speak to Japanese (laugh), person. It's not reality.

R: Why is that?

K: They maybe they think... why (laugh), why he or she is Japanese, why we speak English?

While willing to admit that many Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) are often unable to speak English, Keisuke (35) argues that the difficulty of running a speaking test is located with the student. Keisuke cannot imagine two Japanese speakers speaking together in English, and thus the discourse of "Japanese can't speak English to other Japanese" is a significant underling reason why a Speaking Test in English is not considered to be feasible in Japan.

In contrast to the JTEs, the native speakers of English consider the issue not to be with the students, but on account of the teachers. Kevin (40) is a native speaker of English who has worked in a private senior high school in Sendai for the last five years.

K: One of the reasons why speaking tests haven't got off the ground, is that the generation of English teachers are still in the mix. They don't know how to speak English, and they are still speaking in classes for more than 80% of the time. It's all about the teacher. The students might spend 10% of the time writing or doing a test, and they are lucky to spend even five

minutes producing the language they are being taught.

This issue of Japanese teachers not being able to evaluate students is attached to a discourse of perfection. Kevin, relates:

K: The reason why students can't speak English and why it is not worked on is a problem of evaluation. Japanese culture has an all or nothing attitude to correctness. So, if you have a problem on a paper, and it is worth five marks, the students can either get five marks or 0 marks. Those are the two options. But speaking just isn't like that. Conversations and communication aren't about being right, there are some things you can do wrong, but it's basically all going on in a grey area.

Within narrowly defined skill sets, it is possible to test students on their listening, grammar and translation proficiency, but speaking is not possible. This idea is supported by students. Masa (20) is now an undergraduate student and studied English for six years in junior and senior high school in Sendai. He explains:

M: Japanese people think exactly, exact of English, they want to remember.

English correctly, so grammar and they want to do this well, but speaking is going to really take a lot of time to do like that.

R: So you will run out of speaking time?

M: First, people think that students should be made to remember the correct grammar first. That can be done. But with speaking, won't we run out of time?

R: So Japanese people only want it exactly right?

M: It's not that they can't speak correctly, they just aren't [yet]

R: Would a speaking test help? There is no speaking test currently.

M: It's okay. It's not necessary.

Masa appeals to the researcher asking 'won't we run out of time', reflecting the cultural value that whatever is done, should be done fully. Unlike reading and writing, speaking is much more difficult to perform flawlessly. This perception of speaking as unreasonably time consuming is reaffirmed directly in the final response of the extract where a speaking test is determined as unnecessary. This connection supports Kevin's assessment of the 'all or nothing' approach to studies. Whether or not speaking English is important or not is a secondary concern, if it cannot be learned perfectly.

A number of the students argued that the underlying reason for the absence of a test was not connected to logistical concerns, evaluation problems or even the difficulty that Japanese feel when speaking to other Japanese people. Yosuke (21) locates the problem with the teachers:

Y: Of the English teachers now, in reality, there aren't that many that speak English well. They can't speak English. They can't really evaluate speaking either.

"ALTs have limited use"

ALTs could be seen as the complement to JTEs in the classroom, in Japanese students would be more likely to speak English with ALTs than with native speakers of Japanese. Jake (30), is a native speaker of English who has worked at a Japanese public high school for the last three years. He outlines the benefits of ALTs in Japanese high schools:

J: [As] Student motivation to speak English increases, student overall English ability increases, [and] students gain global/

international exposure and can view English as a living language. Native Japanese teachers of English are able to get assistance from the ALTs for grammar and content help on student essays and speeches. The JTEs also gain the opportunity to maintain or improve their English skills and exposure to different educational methods in the classroom if they observe us.

However, in contrast to the potential gains, the broad consensus of students, JTEs and former ALTs in the database of this study identified underutilization of ALTs as a significant problem. Kevin (27), a former ALT who taught for two years, explains how he saw his role as an ALT in the English classroom:

K: In one case, the Japanese teacher was old school and wanted me to be a human tape recorder. In another case, the Japanese teacher was flaky, so I just took over [the] class and often taught by [it] myself. Both scenarios waste the potential in having two teachers working together to maximize the learning potential.

Kevin uses the metaphor of a 'human tape recorder' to position himself as a passive victim of the 'old school' teaching method. 'Old school' presents the JTE as dated, and the teaching method as ineffective. From the perspective of a JTE, Nanae (35) sees the problem as one of communication:

N: Sometimes, because of the lack of communication, the ALTs cannot have enough job, they are just bored and sitting in front of desk all day, sometimes, that's pretty *mottai nai, ne*, a waste of time

Both Kevin and Nanae see the process as a "waste", indicating that both believe in the potential of ALTs to fulfill its promise to the Japanese classroom, but that this is not happening.

The cause of the underutilization is connected to differences in how JTEs see ALTs contribution, and how the ALTs perceive themselves. Izumi (29) explains how her mother recommended that she listen to the radio if she wants to improve her English:

I: then my mum said it's much better than going to Japanese teachers' tutorial. If you listen radio course, the native speaker will be your lecturer, so you can listen to the native speaker's pronunciation, so I repeated what I heard on the radio. I think it helped.

Learning spoken English is approached in Japan with an emphasis on having native like pronunciation, which is one of the reasons why Kevin felt frustrated as a 'human tape recorder'. This emphasis on pronunciation has also informed activities such as reading aloud from the textbook and reading dialogues without needing to construct a conversation. However, the priorities of being able to read, write and pronounce English perfectly, before having natural conversations, appear to be shifting in favor of gaining conversational fluency earlier.

For younger English learners, such as Nagisa (20) reading from the textbook is not perceived as valuable.

R: Was this useful?

N: For speaking, yeah, it is a kind of useful, to pronounce the English by myself, but not for real communication with other people.

Interviewees in their teens or early twenties saw ALTs as useful as a source of natural conversation

as well as native pronunciation. Nagisa distinguishes the classroom speaking exercises from ‘real’ conversation showing a clear break from the discourse of English being a subject learnt for the purposes of entering university and nothing else. She is not concerned with speaking perfectly, but with being understood.

“English is not relevant to the lives of Japanese people”

Yosuke (21) gives the most direct voice to the discourse that “English is not relevant to the lives of Japanese people”:

Y: *Because now there is only Japanese people in Japan, there is no need to use English, everyone is studying it, but it feels like there's no point. In the world, if there's more people coming to Japan, then I think more Japanese people will go overseas more. And then I think the English skills will take place naturally.*

This sentiment is echoed by Ayumi (33) :

R: Are there any major changes that would help Japanese English speak better?

A: [Pause 3s] On one hand, unlike other countries, I guess its possible for us not to have English at all. Even if you do the business, we have a big enough population in this country, and do the business, target Japanese. There isn't really a need for mastering English.

Ayumi answers the question of how Japanese speakers could improve by explaining why it is unnecessary for students to study English. This shows that the notion of necessity is hierarchically superior to considerations of improved teaching effectiveness. This is also agreed upon by one of the younger students Masa (20) :

M: If it is changes, the curriculum should change.

The chances to speak will grow.

R: Is that a good thing?

M: If it's necessary, then it's good to improve.

The implication of Masa's final response, however, is that it is not necessary to improve. For those that don't see English as valuable, questions of improvement and ways of increasing efficiency are irrelevant. Literature and research into how Japanese learners of English can improve will continue to fall on deaf ears if the value of English is in dispute.

“Japanese people must learn to speak English for the future”

A counter-discourse is emerging in Japan, that “Japanese people must learn to speak English for the future”. This is in conflict with the discourse that “English is not relevant to the lives of Japanese people”. Yosuke begins by claiming that speaking is unnecessary:

Y: In Japan, we don't see foreign countries people, and we never have spoke there. So, we, I was born in Japan, and I will be died in Japan.

R: Why do you need to learn English at all, like reading and writing? Why are there, there so many classes? If Japan doesn't need English, why do you have to so much *yomikaki*?

Y: Globalisation (laugh). In the future we need English some day. But I think Japanese people should go abroad more, and more communication with foreign people. And foreign people more, I want foreign people to come Japan. In Japan, not Japanese people, so, foreign people and Japanese people are more in Japan.

Yosuke initially states that ‘I was born in Japan,

and I will be died in Japan' as a reason why English is not necessary. However, this perspective is in conflict with the notion of 'globalization'. The need to study English is justified by the rise of globalization, but the speaking part of communication with foreigners is not at the forefront of the minds of Japanese people. Communication with the rest of the world is perceived by Yosuke as a reading and writing relationship, rather than a speaking and listening one.

In contrast, a number of teachers in the dataset rejected the argument that English is unnecessary. Keisuke sees the conflict between the two discourses as temporally bound:

R: Some people say if you are born here, work here and die here, you don't need English. What do you think?

K: Now, it's today. It is acceptable for twenty years ago. But now, we have to, in the future we must know, must use the English I believe.

Some students were also in support of English being of continued importance for Japanese people despite the general lack of applicability within Japan. Shizuka offers support for the introduction of English into elementary schools:

S: They want to start English from elementary school. I think it's a good thing. They realize you know, today is globalizing everything. They thought we need English skill for Japanese future, for economy, for everything.

"Speaking is not important"

Despite the majority of students and teachers supporting the notion of English, within English proficiency, speaking is perceived as the least valuable. Ayumi (33) was one of the few students without access to ALTs in her high school, and is

unable to recall ever speaking English during that time:

A: There was no time when students were required to speak English. I don't remember that at all.

R: Okay, currently there are some people who think there should be a speaking test, for the university entrance exams. What do you think?

A: I don't think it is necessary, because basically because education is done in Japanese at university level. Also it would be logistically difficult, I can't really see. I guess we could follow what TOEFL have, but still I don't think it is necessary.

Speaking English, and speaking exams, are not necessary because they can't be directly applied to university studies in Japan. The absence of an emphasis on spoken English though does not conflict directly with Japanese students having English proficiency:

R: What do you think of spoken skills from Japanese graduates?

A: I think still weak. Especially when I compare with students from other Asian countries, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, south east Asian countries. I see the level of English itself they have is about the same, but the way they speak and the confidence of speaking English is quite different, Japanese are not confident.

Ayumi sees Japanese EFL learners' spoken English as inferior to people of other Asian countries, however this is different from 'the level of English itself'. This distinction between spoken and actual proficiency reflects the perception that even if the acquisition of English in general is desirable, being able to *speak* the language is not crucial.

This contrasts deeply with native English speaking teachers, who see themselves as the target audience of EFL learners. Charles (27) argues:

C: Frankly, showing kids that they can communicate in a different language, even with imperfect grammar, is worth more than memorizing grammar anyway.

Yosuke perceives the cause for this lack of emphasis on speaking as the structure of University Entrance exams.

Y: If we have speaking test, in Japan, I want to speak, so. But in Japan, we don't have speaking English chance, so maybe Japanese people think we don't need speaking English.

This has led to a distinction between good teachers of English as a written language, and good teachers of English as a spoken language. Wataru (20) sees the merit of an English teacher as based on their grammar and translation instruction, and the spoken proficiency of the teacher as supplementary, but not essential:

R: Can a teacher of English be good at teaching English without speaking English?

W: Yes. In reading. We am prepare class in home. Reading. And in class teacher can translation.

To change the perception of speaking as unimportant, Jake (30) offers conditional support for the introduction of a speaking test:

R: Is it worth the effort?

J: Yes, but only if the students and their communities buy into the concept that having some comprehension in English is necessary for their lives. Tests and exams can be compartmentalized constructs of a rigid and

incoherent curriculum that will always be side-stepped by educators and students, like 'teaching to the test'.

Jake characterizes the education curriculum developers as "rigid and incoherent", precluding the chance for English learners to achieve fluency in English. The tests are by implicature not giving actual proficiency. He positions teachers as "side-stepping" true learning, by focusing on tests rather than building real-world English proficiency.

"Speaking is a motivator"

As a counter discourse, "Speaking is a motivator" was suggested by both a JTE and a former ALT as one of the important byproducts of allowing classes to spend more time on speaking. Nanae (35) explains that because the students at her schools were uninterested in taking the University entrance exams, this allowed them to work more on speaking:

N: We could invite ALTs very often, usually naughty students really enjoyed the communication with ALTs, usually they would just sleep during the class but when the ALTs shows up, they got really excited and cheer up. Even though they couldn't speak English well they said "Hi, Hi", and they were very cheerful.

This was supported by Wataru's (20) reaction:

R: Do Japanese people really need to speak English?

W: Mmm, it's a difficult question. Pause. But, I think everyone can speak English if they speak English, if they can speak English, they more enjoy life. Their life.

Conclusion

The present study has sought to elicit some of the underlying reasons why Japanese students' speaking proficiency is the lowest developed of the four major proficiencies. Attitudes to English, and in particular the role of speaking are changing. Older teachers of English, who come from a different era, will be replaced by students who were exposed to ALTs and increasingly see English as important for conversation as well as writing and reading.

Moreover, perceptions of use of ALTs to the classroom appears to be changing. Students today see ALTs beyond their capacity to pronounce English accurately. Given that Japanese are adverse to speaking in English to other Japanese, ALTs could potentially be utilized to run speaking tests in Japan. If such programs are successful, then the curriculum can work toward having speaking tests included in university entrance exams.

The paper has provided an update on changing attitudes towards developing spoken proficiency of English in Japanese high schools. This gradual shift will mean that future generations of Japanese learners of English will be more likely to have higher levels of communicative competence than previous generations.

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