

A Journal-based Reflection on Teaching English Discussion Skills to Returnee Japanese Students

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ABSTRACT

Based on notes kept as part of a teaching journal, this paper discusses the author's reflections on teaching group English Discussion Classes containing Japanese returnee students. It begins by reporting the challenges that the teacher faced in terms of returnee student behavior, alongside observations about non-returnee class members, before discussing a range of actions a teacher may take in response. Finally, this study's usefulness and limitations are addressed, and directions for future research are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

The wider social context of 'returnees' in Japan has long received the attention of scholars. Arguably the most enduring themes in writings on Japanese returnees concern the challenges that arise from moving between countries with different native languages and social expectations¹. Despite this, detailed academic research into the (re)introduction of returnees into the local Japanese education is largely absent. To this researcher's knowledge, even further lacking is research into how the process of returning to Japan affects their English language education, which, considering returnees typically have acquired greater English proficiency than other students, appears critical (Enloe & Lewin, 1987). Returnees are referred to as *kikokushijo* in Japanese, and broadly defined as native Japanese students who return to Japan after spending at least one academic year enrolled in a foreign education system (Kanno, 2000). Recent figures show that there are around 80,000 returnee students currently enrolled in formal education in Japan, a number that has more than tripled in the last forty years, and looks set to continue as globalization progresses (Clavel, 2014).

At Rikkyo University, like many local institutions, all first year undergraduate students are required to take English language classes, regardless of ability, and separated into levels according to TOEIC scores. Mandatory English classes include reading and writing, presentation, and English discussion classes (EDC)—the latter being the focus of this present study. EDC consists of 100 minute classes, meeting once a week, for a total of 28 weeks across the academic year. Forming an important part of Rikkyo University students' foreign language education, EDC features relatively small classes sizes, limited to 9 students, in order to improve students' English speaking ability. Level I English Discussion classes (the highest level) at Rikkyo University require students to have a TOEIC test score 680 or higher, to theoretically place students with others of similar ability. However, in practice this can lead to de-facto mixed ability classes, as returnee students are mixed with locally educated students as a result of scoring similarly highly on English placement tests (the latter often colloquially referred to as *strong test takers*, the implication being that their high English test scores may not correlate with real and practical English *ability*). In light of the increasing number of returnee students this leads to the central theme of this present paper: what to *do* with returnee students in English discussion classes? Or, more precisely:

- How do returnee students perform in English discussion classes?
- How do other students respond to returnee students?
- What actions can a teacher take in response to these issues?

¹ For a more detailed discussion of social aspects of Japanese returnees, see Kanno (2000, 2003)

METHODOLOGY

The chosen method for this discussion is a reflective teaching journal. The benefits of journaling for educators in particular are that it enables them to develop their skills through interrogating their “day to day behaviors and underlying attitudes, alongside outcomes and the decisions that all teachers need to make” (McDonough, 1994, p. 64-65). Practically speaking, this involves activating the three cognitive dimensions of reflective teaching: *reflection-on-action*, *reflection-in-action*, and *reflection for-action*: that is, thinking about one’s teaching after, during, and before classes (Schon, 1983).

Two classes were selected for inclusion, with the main criteria being that classes had to contain a combination of at least one returnee student, and at least one non-returnee student. Both classes met once per week over a 14 week semester and contained eight students each, with observations regularly recorded in a journal kept on a secure personal computer. To protect anonymity of students, exact student utterances will not be quoted, nor will student grades be discussed, and any identifying information will not be shared. With this in mind, after the semester was completed all qualifying journal entries were collated into a single document and analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was selected as it provides a flexible, accessible, and common approach to qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six steps to thematic analysis were provided by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, search for initial themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the report. A primarily data-driven inductive approach was preferred to data coding over a theory-centered deductive approach in order to ensure the results were strongly linked to the data. This approach was judged appropriate in light of the lack of existing theory in this research area, however, where applicable, the results will be discussed with reference to relevant literature.

RESULTS

Based on the journal data, four broad thematic categories were discovered: *How did returnee students perform in English class? How did other students respond to returnee students? How was the teacher-student relationship impacted? What actions were taken in response to these issues?* Within these categories sub-themes that emerged will also be discussed.

How did returnee students perform in English classes?

Perhaps simultaneously the most redundant and yet striking observation noted was that returnee students appeared significantly more confident with their ability to communicate in English, which was reflected both in the *quality* and also in the *content* of their discussion contributions. The following representative observations came from classes in week one of the semester:

English quality differences

[Returnee Student A] was speaking so fast today, even I was having to pay attention to keep up.

I think that class was too easy for them – usually I allow extra time at the start of the activity for checking vocabulary and comparing ideas before the real discussion starts, but these guys didn’t need that, I had a lot of time at the end of class to kill, I wonder if they noticed?!

These statements reflected the fact that I under-estimated their language ability of these returnee students in particular, and the advanced learners in this class in general. Reflecting further on this, I perhaps failed to heed Ewald’s (2007) warning regarding the need to understand the potential for the varying characteristics and abilities of advanced learners, which has also been corroborated

in an EDC context by Yamauchi (2017). As will be discussed below, the higher than expected ability had impacts on teaching decisions for subsequent lessons.

They were really reluctant to use the target language, it's like they would use it once to show they can understand it, and refuse to use it again, no matter how much I encourage them to do so.

In EDC, every regular lesson features target language phrases (*opinions, supporting ideas, checking understanding, etc.*) which the students should show understanding of and competence with in order to get grades for that particular class. However, within level I classes, there appeared to be marked increase in reluctance to use the target language for returnee students in comparison with non-returnee students. Again, the reasons for this may be complex. Lack of understanding of competence with phrases was discounted as a major reason for reduced target language use among returnee students on account of their overall high English proficiency. On the contrary, comments from students (not quoted here for anonymity) suggest that the reason was that the target language was *too easy*, and they had a greater lexical resource from which they could select preferred alternative language in order to complete their discussions. Another reason was put forward by Yamauchi (2017), who suggested that low target language use among advanced learners may be due to “a preference for conversational interactions to maintain rapport” (p. 282).

English content differences

[Returnee Student B] talked a lot his personal life, a lot of oversharing! He's talking about his love life in a way that other students rarely do.

Wow, I was surprised – they weren't shy to discuss that topic [death penalty] at all! They went straight for it, a lot of detail.

Notes similar to the above were a reoccurring theme in the journal data, recorded in almost every weekly class, typically connected to *over-sharing of personal life information*, and *confidence of sharing ideas*. The reasons for this are likely complex and perhaps beyond the scope of this brief paper, but are in line with previously made observations related to the greater ability (or confidence) of returnee students to volunteer answers, express themselves, and speak their mind, which they attribute to deeper cultural differences (French, 2000; Ford, 2009).

How did other students respond to returnee students?

As noted above, the ability differences in classes can result in de-facto mixed ability classes. The following observations have been further classified into *positive responses to returnee students* and *negative responses to returnee students*.

Positive responses to returnee students

The other students seem almost in awe of him [a returnee student]. I don't think it's just his English skills, although they are great, but he has a lot of international experience, he's lived in several English speaking countries, the others seem somewhat jealous of him.

Once again, this was a typical journal entry recorded in week two. The impacts of this kind of positive response to returnee students from non-returnee students are difficult to unpack based solely on journal observations from a third party. However, primarily the impact seemed a positive one on the closeness of relationships among students in these classes. This was evaluated as a

positive in light of extensive research highlighting the importance of rapport building among learners (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

Negative responses to returnee students.

One of the returnee students had to repeat himself a lot today, I don't think the other students could completely understand him, even though his English was fine...he had to slow down his speech and simply his vocabulary so others could keep up.

She [returnee student] finished the practice activity while most of the other students were still reading the instructions. I think the other students felt pressure to go faster, and I think some comprehension was lost as a result.

The returnee students offer answers much more eagerly than other students... comparing how the other students act when paired with non-returnees, it seems as though non-returnees hesitate to speak more if in a group with a returnee.

The above remarks, from weeks five and seven respectively, reflect the negative impacts of returnee students' higher English proficiency. For example, the student who had to repeat himself showed signs of frustration at having to grade their speaking in this way, which in turn may have made the other students uncomfortable. Similarly, the faster finishing returnee student seemed bored and distracted while waiting for others to catch up, and they in turn may have felt the need to hurry. Of course there are naturally individual differences between students, even within classes or similar ability, these differences appeared amplified in classes with returnee students. The non-returnee students' willingness to communicate seemed to be higher when a returnee student was not present in their discussion group.

How was the teacher-student relationship impacted?

The returnee students seem to talk much more freely with me. They always ask questions about me and my life, my home country etc. They also stay more often after class to talk to me, sometimes about class issues but often just conversation about anything.

The above quote reflects the potential for teacher-student relationships to be much closer with returnee students. This finding reflects Tobin's (1998) suggestion that the teacher's status and role may be different with returnee students on account of the higher potential for similar overseas experience and language knowledge. However, although Tobin (1998) posited that this may also be a negative, due to the teacher losing their 'expert' status within the classroom, this study did not find evidence to support that claim. Although it was beyond the scope of this study to explicitly assess student performance, this affected status was in these cases judged mostly to be a positive in terms of an increased rapport between teachers and returnee students, particularly as research suggests that a greater rapport—defined by friendliness and caring (Altman, 1990)—between teachers and students can be a positive predictor of student outcomes in terms of student motivation, perceived amount learned, and course grades (Wilson, Ryan, & Pugh 2010).

What actions were taken in response to these issues?

In light of the above identified themes and questions, and based on Schon's (1983) guidance about reflecting on-action, in-action, and for-action, several teaching decisions were made throughout the semester in order to best deliver successful lessons to the classes.

Flexible approach to returnee classes

A useful guide here was Şalli-Çopur's (2005) framework for dealing with mixed ability classes. Among their suggestions was the use of 'contingency plans', which are additional activities prepared by the teacher for cases when activities are completed early by some or all students. This can be an effective way for returnee students to spend their time in classes, rather than waiting for others to catch up. Alongside this, Şalli-Çopur (2005) reminds teachers that in-class activities do not all necessarily need to be completed in their entirety by members of a class, and by approaching each activity and student flexibly, on a case-by-case basis, activities may be omitted, extended, or only partially completed by a student.

Along similar lines, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) argue that giving advanced learners more autonomy can be an effective strategy for maintaining and enhancing engagement. As EDC classes are group lessons, this chiefly consisted of decisions that affected the whole class, however, my observations did not note any negative effects. One example that I employed involved giving students options about discussion questions or topics, while taking care to make sure the overall lesson and course goals were met. Another example was giving students more control over their discussions by asking them to notify the teacher when they were ready to move on from a discussion topic, rather than rigidly sticking to the standard ten or 16-minute discussion lengths prescribed by the course outlines—in practice, this often resulted in discussions continuing for longer than the allotted times as groups with returnees would discuss things in more detail than other groups. Although this can present time-management challenges, in light of the pay-off in perceived increased engagement it was seen as worthwhile.

A further change that I made was incorporating task-based language teaching (TBLT) activities. In brief, TBLT involves students using language to achieve a meaningful goal, thereby encouraging more authentically communicative language use. For example, rather than simply discussing a topic, a TBLT activity would include a clearly defined outcome, such the need to reach a consensus or make a decision one way or another (Ellis, 2003). Including this extra step, it has been suggested that TBLT may be one way to address the needs of advanced English learners². With this in mind, I often tried to switch discussion questions to be more aligned with TBLT, and the extra challenge posed did seem to more fully engage the students.

CONCLUSION

This paper discusses several issues and challenges in teaching English classes containing returnee students. The main findings were related to the themes of returnee student performance, how other students respond to returnee students, the different relationship between the teacher and returnee students, as well as brief discussions of actions taken in response to these observations. However, several limitations should be noted, which means that the findings presented here should be taken with caution. Firstly, this study was carried out with a small sample size and therefore may lack generalizability. Secondly, it relies on the subjective and therefore potentially biased reflections made of a single researcher's journal. Finally, due to researcher limitations, it relied on existing English language research only, lacking access to Japanese language work. However, despite these limitations, this study does suggest several potential lines of future enquiry: How do returnee students themselves perceive their English classes? What are the most effective strategies for teachers of classes containing both returnee and non-returnee students? What institutional decisions should be made regarding language streaming with regards to returnee and non-returnee classes? Whatever future directions are taken, it is likely that Tobin's (1998) call for flexibility and recognition of the differences among returnee students will remain central.

² See Lesley and West (2019) for more discussion of TBLT in English discussion classes.

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