

The Student-centered Classroom in EFL Classes in Japan: A Team-based Approach

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Nobody would debate the fact that English has become the international language of the world (Seidlhofer, 2011). The use of English worldwide has become so prevalent that it is often the chosen language in international business meetings even when there are no native English speakers present (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2006). However, as English is becoming increasingly important, the English skills of Japanese people ranks second last in Asia (Diplomat, 2011). Moreover, the English abilities of Japanese students aren't improving. According to the latest government report, the English level of high school students in Japan is far below the goals the government has set out for its next generation of citizens (*Japan Times*, 2015).

Recognizing the importance of English as an international language, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has announced that English will become a formal subject in elementary schools starting in 2020 (*Japan Times*, 2014) with the hope of producing more internationally-minded youths. With the challenge set, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Japan will need to prepare and educate themselves in order to best meet the needs and goals of their English learners. One approach in becoming a valuable contributor in the learning evolution of the Japanese students is to recognize what isn't working—and introduce new concepts or ideas. As Geoffrey Canada (2013) boldly affirms, if something in the classroom isn't working—we have to change it.

When looking at what hasn't been working in the Japanese classroom, the silence in the classroom is an area that needs to be closely examined. This classroom silence presents a challenge to many language teachers who agree with the idea that the most effective way of learning how to speak a second

language is through oral interaction (e.g. Izumi, 2003; Swain, 2005). In Japan, silence in the EFL classroom seems especially commonplace. In fact, King (2013) found that in the Japanese university system only one percent of all classroom interaction in English is initiated by students. This silence may be attributed to many factors; however, extensive research (e.g. Saito & Ebsworth, 2004; Cutrone, 2009; Harumi, 2011) has suggested that one of the components behind the classroom reticence in Japan is the classroom style. Perhaps the sought-after change in education philosophy should start here. To transform the classroom from the traditional teacher-based, exam-laden model in Japan to a student-centred, alternative-assessed approach could revolutionize the future of language learning in Japan.

The teacher-centred approach

Typically in Japan, the classroom is a teacher-centred class where the students listen to the teacher and make notes (Hashimoto & Fukuda, 2011). In fact, students expect to be lectured to (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Moreover, Japanese students are expected to be 'quiet, passive, and obedient youths who perform well on tests' (Nozaki, 1993:28, cited in Hammond, 2007). Activities where students engage in debates and give their opinions are rarely found in classrooms in Japan (Hammond, 2007). King (2013) argues that the teacher-centred, lecture style language classroom typically found in Japan actually disengages the students' interest and creates the boredom often found in the EFL classroom. King (2013) adds that it is the actual implementation of the teacher-centred classroom that is the main cause of the lack of participation in the language classroom in Japan. It is in this environment where getting the students to engage in authentic communication is extremely challenging for the EFL teacher (Hammond, 2007). Ultimately, it seems that it is teacher-centred approach to the classroom that creates challenges for EFL teachers when encouraging the students to speak aloud and participate in discussions rather than to simply listen to the teacher.

The student-centred approach

Armstrong (2012) argues that the teacher-centred approach in universities conflicts with how students best learn. It is with this in mind where the student-centred approach to learning should be explored. The student-centred approach falls under the constructivist theory of learning where, according to the University College of Dublin (n.d.), the focus of the class shifts from the teacher to the student who then becomes more active in their learning. According to the George Lucas Educational Foundation (2013), active learners have a richer learning experience when they do something active in the classroom, such as discussing new ideas or explaining new concepts to their peers. In accordance with this approach, and for more meaningful learning to take place, EFL teachers should encourage their students to engage in more active types of learning. An extensive amount of research (e.g. Smith & Cardaciotto, 2011; Wong & Nunan, 2011; Hashimoto & Fukuda, 2011) indicates that a student-centred classroom is the preferred classroom approach for language learning. Subsequently, it seems obvious that EFL teachers in Japan should switch from the traditional, objectivist view of the classroom to a more modern, constructivist view. In order for an EFL teacher to develop an active, student-centred classroom where rich discussion takes place, the typical student passive-mindedness must be expunged, and a constructivist, student-centred classroom may be the answer.

Team-based learning

The team-based learning approach is one student-centred model that could be implemented into an EFL class in Japan. Tajino (2016) defines teamwork as an effort that each person makes towards accomplishing a common goal. In the case of language learning, improving one's ability to communicate in the target language can be assumed to be the goal. Several types of team-based approaches, such as team learning, collaborative learning, and cooperative learning have been used by language practitioners around the world and

can be adapted to fit the needs of the EFL students in Japanese universities.

Allwright (2016) says that a collaborative learning experience is when two or more people in the class work together in order to further develop themselves. Dillenbourg (1999) defines collaborative learning as one where two or more students attempt to learn something together. This definition is unsatisfactory as it is too broad (Dillenbourg, 1999); however, the definition suggests that collaborative learning is a team-based approach where two or more students work together in order to reach their learning goals. Black et al. (2006) claim that collaborative learning is beneficial because it develops metacognitive skills. Hashimoto and Fukuda (2011) found that in Japan students become more motivated when they set and achieve their goals, proving that Japanese students could benefit from and even thrive in a collaborative learning model.

Cooperative learning is similar to the collaborative learning and it is a classroom where small groups of students working together to maximize their own learning as well as the learning of the other group members (Johnson & Johnson, n.d.). Again, this definition is expansive; however, it validates the notion that cooperative learning is a type of team-based learning where the students are working together to reach their goals. Sharan (2010) states that cooperative learning creates a class atmosphere that nurtures two of the most important educational goals—academic skills and social skills.

Another team-based approach that is similar to both the collaborative learning model and the cooperative learning model is competitive team-based learning (CTBL). Hosseini (2014) defines CTBL as a situation when all team members fully engage themselves in order to solve a problem or complete a task by exchanging ideas, assisting each other with meaning, and reaching a resolution diplomatically. CTBL also falls into the team-based philosophy as the students work in teams to advance their learning and understanding. Hosseini (2014) claims that when the students work in teams, they not only feel responsible for their own learning, but they feel accountable for their teammates learning as well. Although all three examples of team-based learning models have an abundance of overlap, all three approaches adhere to the team-based

learning philosophy.

Benefits of team-based learning

Social interaction

Social interaction plays a vital role in intellectual development (a Vygotsky concept; cited in Black et al., 2006). Hosseini (2010) corroborates this concept in language learning, claiming that language is learned best through social interaction. Moreover, Allwright (2016) claims that, ultimately, all classrooms are social environments. However, student interaction is one of the most overlooked aspects of education (Johnson & Johnson, n.d.). With mountains of research supporting this concept, the importance of interaction in language learning mustn't be understated and EFL teachers must create more opportunities for the students to interact in the their language classes.

Students can learn from each other

In general, students not only learn from the teacher, but they learn from each other in the class (Allwright, 1984). When students work with each other in teams, there is 'more opportunities for transference of skills, strategies, thinking styles and approaches, attitudes, and so forth' (Hosseini, 2014:180). By introducing a team-based classroom, the students have more opportunities to learn from others.

Moreover, it must be noted that team-learning involves both the students and the teachers working together (Tajino & Smith, 2016) to achieve learning goals. Classroom interaction is not only the interaction between the students, it is also the interaction between all of the people in the classroom which includes the teacher (Allwright, 1994; cited in Tajino & Smith, 2016). However, Sharan (2010) points out that team-based learning could have some major constraints. Sharan (2010) argues that it is likely that a team-based classroom will fail in a host country where a team-based classroom is inconsistent with the cultural norms found in the host country's schools.

Team-based assessment

The topic of language testing has become so expansive and so active that it is impossible to touch on all of the aspects in a single paper (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001). However, student assessment in the EFL classroom continues to be debated (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2006) among teachers and researchers all over the world. Hashimoto and Fukuda (2011) argue that Japanese students' motivation in learning English might be low because of the exam-based mentality of the students. The students in Japan tend to become merely 'passive recipients of information' (Hashimoto & Fukuda, 2011:17) in this teacher-centred, test-based educational model. Maftoon and Ziafar (2013) corroborate the importance of the test system in Japan stating that the very futures of the Japanese learners depend on their test scores—and the students are fully aware of this. It is with this in mind that it can be understood that the students prefer a teacher-centred classroom (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013).

Recently, alternative methods of assessing students has been a growing phenomenon (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001) and many teachers are employing alternative assessment practices in their classrooms. Alternative assessment is a term that is generally regarded to mean assessment that is more formative and less summative, and it is usually less formal than the traditional testing model (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001). Some examples of alternative types of assessment include, among others, portfolio assessment, peer assessment, self-assessment, and computer-based assessment. Educators can now draw from various forms of assessment practices to better match their students' learning goals. Additionally, as tests force teachers to make pedagogical decisions they might not want to (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001), EFL teachers in Japan might want to examine alternative methods of assessment in order to best serve their students' learning styles.

In concert with the idea of a team-based approach in the classroom is the concept of team-assessment. As education is constantly changing (Lukacs & Galluzzo, 2014), it may be time to consider alternative methods of testing

in Japanese universities in order to best serve the learning goals and learning styles of their students. When making assessment decisions, teachers must ask themselves: Why are their students studying? Are they studying to receive an official score? Or, are they learning in order to improve their skills and abilities? This distinction must be recognized so that the teacher can make the correct pedagogical decision which not only includes the method of instruction, but it also includes the assessment choice. Are their students aiming at a specific score on a standardized grammar test? If so, perhaps the traditional teacher-centred, exam-based classroom model would be a suitable approach. However, if the students are taking EFL classes in order to improve their ability to communicate in English, teachers might make a better pedagogical decision by implementing an alternative method of testing.

Allwright (2016) emphasizes that student competition for official scores undermines education and believes that the foundation of learning is for each student to 'gain maximum personal benefit' (Allwright, 2016:xv) from the class. It is with this in mind that teachers should examine alternative forms of assessment. For example, in the CBTL model, the students take some tests and exams collaboratively as this 'subordinates testing to teaching' (Hosseini, 2014:180). Another example, which is aimed at motivating students in a language class, Hosseini (2014) introduced an assessment where teams competed against one another, and the team that performed best over three classes received an 'A' grade for their teammates' final exams regardless of the actual grade they may have received. A learning portfolio is an alternative method of assessment. This alternative method of formative assessment is a logical choice as 'the student-centred classroom is at the heart of portfolio assessment' (Burner, 2014:146).

For the most part, education globally is most concerned with academic achievement regardless of what learning takes place and this greatly limits any newfound innovations in language learning (Hosseini, 2014). Allwright (2016) agrees, stating that both language teachers and learners feel that they must meet the state's official 'score' in order to feel that any meaningful learning has

taken place. It is with this in mind that Allwright (2016) emphatically states that language learning has been seriously hampered by the competitiveness to achieve high grades that has become the norm in the classrooms around the world. Alderson and Banerjee (2001) add that empirical evidence regarding the value of large, standardized tests is lacking. Brookhart (2011) affirms that if grades must be used, they should be in place only to support motivation and learning.

Is it more beneficial to the student to have a high test score, or is it more advantageous to be a better communicator in the new language? If the teachers' goal is to help improve their students' English speaking skills, a pleasant, relaxing, student-centred classroom could be the answer. Hardiman (2102) argues that teachers should provide a fun and stress-free classroom where the students can express themselves freely. If the teacher can create such a classroom atmosphere and create a personal bond with the students, the pursuit of grades may diminish. As Cutrone (2009) argues, in order to create an intimate classroom where rich learning takes place, teachers must move away from the current evaluation system. Presently, there seems to exist a difficulty in how EFL teachers can harmonize a student-centred classroom with the Japanese students' dependence on the teacher-centred classroom. So, the vital question posed by Harumi (2011) must be addressed: is it better for the students to change their learning style or the teachers to change their teaching style? The simple answer is that both teachers and students should make some adjustments in order to make a better classroom environment which promotes more meaningful learning.

Allwright (2016) calls for an educational model which is more socially aware and productive; one where society cooperates rather than competes with one another. Allwright (2016) adds that we shouldn't have winners and losers when it comes to learning. However, perhaps the necessary steps are already being taken towards a more cohesive, global learning environment. Johnson and Johnson (n.d.) state that while competition for grades once dominated education, cooperative learning is recently becoming the teachers' choice of

instruction in many classrooms around the world. Moreover, as it is the teachers who recognize their students' learning problems best (Lukacs & Galluzzo, 2014), it is the teachers who must continue these small steps in making the foundational transition from a teacher-centred classroom to a student-centred classroom in Japan. Armstrong (2012) suggests that when making change, small pilot programs should be encouraged in order to gauge the momentum of any change. While there may be many reasons behind the existence of classroom silence in Japan, teachers must continue to research effective methods of eliciting active interaction in the classroom in order for meaningful learning to take place—and the team-based, team-assessed model is certainly a change worth considering. In fact, it may revolutionize the learning philosophy currently dominating the EFL classrooms in Japan.

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