

Attempting to Use English in Japanese University Classes

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Abstract

As people's interests in other peoples and corporations' interests in expanding their sources and markets have increased, the desire and need for a uniform language to use in interactions has also increased. These forces have resulted in English emerging as the world's common language, which has pressured countries, businesses, and schools to have their members become capable of understanding and using English in their lives, work, and studies. This paper begins with a look at recent developments in the teaching of English with the purpose of developing abilities to use English in limited situations, instead of for using English in multiple settings. It then focusses on how this is being carried out in Japanese universities, emphasizing the challenges these efforts are facing in their hopes of being successful.

Background

In modern times, the idea of the need for language teaching to include teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) rather than just teaching English for general purposes (EGP or GE) to be used in any situation began to solidify in the field of English language teaching (ELT) in the 1960s. The need for large numbers of non-English speakers to be able to understand, and perhaps communicate, in English, even though they did not live in circumstances that would require this, emerged in the aftermath of and as a direct consequence of the outcome of World War II. Leading up to World War I and continuing ever since, the world's nations have become more and more interconnected in the areas of knowledge, information, and research and of technology, commerce, economics, and finance. This was made possible because of developments in transportation and communication systems that allowed for ever more extensive and rapid interactions among people from distant lands. The more these possibilities were made use of, the greater the demand for them. And because of the extensive colonies of the United Kingdom and the decisive interventions by the United States in the latter stages of both WWI and WWII, and because the United States was one of the few developed countries

to not have suffered extensive damage to its infrastructure, manufacturing plants, and financial centers during either war, particularly WWII, and because of its overall power in the world at that time, English came to dominate international communications and commerce. This has led to the situation in which many people from many developed and developing societies find themselves in today, which is needing to be able to understand and communicate in English.

A conscious, strong push for this idea of the need to teach English for purposes that were not mainly personal (because one was simply interested in the language or people or culture or felt it would improve one's status or impress others) did not emerge until the 1970s. Particularly, the oil crises in the early 1970s highlighted the need for people, who did not normally need to interact with each other and did not speak a mutually understood language, to be able to carry out work and interactions together. A number of times during these years, the supplies of oil did not match the demands. As a result, enormous increases in the amounts of money in the form of investments and Western knowledge and expertise, to increase production, entered those Middle East nations and companies with vast oil reserves. Most of these nations and companies had relatively few workers who could do their jobs in a Western language. Since the money was coming from the Western nations, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, those Middle East companies felt a need to have their workers learn English not for their personal pleasure but just so they could learn new technologies, participate in discussions and negotiations about work-related matters, and do their jobs well. This was the beginning of the modern-day interest in learning ESP and in the current interest in schools to provide these types of English language classes. So, ESP has been around for decades, though the concept has become of interest to many Japanese universities only recently.

ESP in Practice

What does ESP really mean in practice at a university? Before answering this for Japan, one needs to consider the situation concerning English in the nation. Since English has not had any functional use Japanese society, English in Japan is learned as a foreign language (EFL), and its teaching has been TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language). In recent years, a few companies (for example, Nissan, Rakuten, and Uniqlo) have tried to induce a change in this situation by requiring its workers at certain levels

in the organization to use English instead of Japanese for internal work-related communications. These moves caused quite a stir when they occurred. So far, few others have followed suit. Therefore, there is still little indication that English is moving toward anything near common usage in Japanese society.

ESP has many subcategories. A few are EOP or EVP (English for Occupational or Vocational Purposes), EST (English for Science and Technology), and EAP (English for Academic Purposes). EBP (English for Business Purposes), for example, is a subcategory of EO/VP. Many universities, which have students who major in business, think this is the kind of English they should be teaching, and Business English classes are common in such universities. However, unless the students have general English abilities strong enough to communicate fairly smoothly in English, they will be unable to use what they learn in a Business English class. Learning business English is not a short cut to becoming able to use English in business settings. This is an error being made all across Japan concerning teaching English in many university departments. Learning English, or any subset of English, as material in a class is not going to be of use in the real world unless the person is already fairly proficient in using English.

Companies in Japan also realize that just learning a lot of business English vocabulary and situational dialogues will not enable them to do their business well enough because if their workers do not have sufficient general English (GE) abilities, they will not be able to develop smooth, comfortable relationships with the foreign people they are trying to work with and they will not feel comfortable themselves. It is also obvious that the teaching of of GE in Japan has not been very effective for a very large majority of the students. However, this does not mean that English classes being taught for general purposes (EGP) should be abandoned. In many cases, though, they do need some rethinking as to their methods and materials, from grade school through university. It is also the case that students cannot be expected to maintain whatever levels of English that they attain without continual usage. If a university department would like its students to be able to use English in their work after graduation, then EGP and/or ESP classes ought to be required throughout the students' years of study.

All ESP classes at university are actually somewhat EAP classes, as the learners are overwhelmingly, if not only, students, not workers in their fields of study, especially in Japan. As students, these learners do not really know the actual circumstances, responsibilities, duties, vocabulary, semantic structures, interactions, etc., of any specific job

in the fields they are studying. They do not really know the content and the necessary interpersonal interactions and situations of the work they are studying about. Therefore, these ESP classes should not be taught as strictly EO/VP classes. University students need to learn the content plus the English language associated with the content. Someone already working in a field already knows the content and only needs to learn the English, and so then, an EO/VP class would be appropriate. Without this knowledge and experience, the students should be studying EAP geared toward their specific field because they are studying in school about their chosen field, not working in it.

Most English language teachers do not have the knowledge base required to teach ESP classes rigorously. There are two ways for teachers to overcome this hurdle. One way would be to take a break from teaching and work in the field for a few years, at least. Obviously, this is not practical, though some ESP teachers come to the field of TESL/TEFL/TESOL (Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language or to Speakers of other Languages) after working in the field they later teach ESP classes about.

The more practical way in an EFL situation is for teachers to sit in classes taught in the students' native language concerning the specific field and then sort of teaching the same students portions of the classes again in English with a focus on presenting and practicing the appropriate English needed. These ESP teachers produce materials and come up with activities that are meant to help the students understand and acquire the needed English and abilities based on what they themselves learned in the classes they attended. So, there needs to be a lag time between the native language content class and the ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes) class. Of course, these teachers would have to be quite good at the students' native language. In an ESL (English as a Second Language) situation, where the language spoken outside the classroom in society was English, the teachers would attend subject matter classes taught in English, and later devise materials and tasks for the students in the same way as in EFL circumstances. In this way, the students would be able to learn the academic content of the lecture classes and improve their English abilities.

A related way of conducting classes and organizing programs is around the concept that both content and language integrated learning (CLIL) should take place. Concerning universities, higher education (HE), this is often termed Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE). The goals of such classes and programs are both improving foreign language abilities and learning the content of the academic

subjects presented. Thus, these courses are somewhat similar to ESAP courses, except that the teachers probably have more long-term expertise in both the content area being taught and in the teaching of ES/FL.

EMI in Practice

Although programs of study being taught in English in countries where English was not the language commonly used by the population increased in the twentieth century, there has been a tremendous increase in these types of programs, particularly in universities, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the European nations well in the lead. In recent years, this sudden increase has also taken place in some countries in Asia, including Japan. Of course, countries such as India and the Philippines, due to relatively modern-times colonization by Britain and the United States, respectively, have had well-established English language programs in HE for a long time.

CLIL courses have existed in Europe for quite some time. This is due to the aspirations among many of these nations to promote good relationships among their various peoples and governments and to become more integrated economically and politically. Obviously, the two major wars in the twentieth century have had something to do with these desires. There are now many programs of study in many European nations in which English is the language of instruction for all courses. This system of teaching has come to be called EMI (English-medium instruction).

In Asia, classes and programs taught in English have also been increasing rapidly in recent years. However, these are primarily not CLIL-type courses. Instead, they are planned with the assumption that the students' English language abilities are sufficient to study in classes in which academic content lectures, in whatever field the students are studying, are given only in English. The teachers of these classes are not teaching the students English. They are only teaching specific content in their specific fields of study. The students are expected to be able to understand these lectures in English and to carry out assignments in English without being assisted with the language. The goal of these EMI classes and programs is only for students to acquire this academic content. If the students increase their English language abilities, also, that is just a beneficial side effect. At least that is the theory behind EMI versus CLIL classes.

Japan's first interest in and use of EMI-type classes took place at about the same time the first institutions of higher learning were founded in Japan. This was part of

the Meiji government's efforts to both modernize and Westernize Japanese society in the latter half of the 1800s. As Japan had few people who had studied at university and much fewer who could teach at this level, it initially needed to bring in many lecturers from overseas. They mainly came from China, the Netherlands, and England. This great predominance of foreign people teaching in foreign languages in HE lasted only about 10 years or so. As soon as there were enough Japanese able to teach modern fields of study, they replaced the foreigners and began teaching in their place and in Japanese. In about 20 years, most of these foreign professors were gone, and so HE content classes in foreign languages also disappeared.

It was not until after World War II that there was, again, any real interest in EMI in HE. This time, however, it was not for teaching Japanese students but for teaching foreigners living in Japan, and only a very few institutions created such programs. In the 1960s, a few more universities opened up abbreviated versions of these programs, giving students from outside Japan opportunities to spend a semester or so living and studying in Japan. These short-term foreign students learned about Japanese culture, art, and society in English, along with studying Japanese language.

As Japan's economy became stronger throughout the 1980s and 90s and came to have a greater impact on the world's economy, the Japanese government became interested in having the nation's universities gain more international recognition and to have them graduate students who were bilingual and would be able to support Japan's increasing overseas business connections and endeavors. It saw internationalization in HE as an important step in achieving this goal and created new rules for university hiring practices, allowing for non-Japanese to become full-time, tenured professors in any field. The government expected universities to hire such professors not only in the fields of foreign languages but also in the fields relating to the various majors the students at the schools were studying, and to have these professors teach their specialties in their native languages to their Japanese students. However, this rarely happened. Almost all of these newly hired international faculty members were assigned to mostly teach foreign language classes.

Following along with the Japanese government's and mass media's support for internationalization and Japan's strengthening economy, more students' families became interested in and financially able to support their children's increasing desires to study abroad. Universities began expanding the numbers of their connections with universi-

ties in other countries, and more students began taking advantage of these increases in reciprocal school-to-school exchange programs. However, as few students from other countries at this time were able to gain strong enough Japanese language abilities to study in classes taught in Japanese, when they took part in a university exchange program to study in Japan, their experiences were less than satisfying. Therefore, universities began insisting that their Japanese partners offer classes that their students could fully participate in, which usually meant classes taught in English. Otherwise, they would stop accepting Japanese exchange students to their universities. At the same time that this situation was developing, the Japanese government began pressuring the universities to increase their numbers of foreign students. As a result of these pressures, more schools began offering short-term EMI courses similar to the kinds that first appeared in the 1960s.

These interests and pressures have continued, even as Japan's economy has become less powerful on the world stage. However, since the turn of the century, the focus of the Japanese government's internationalization efforts has taken a new direction. Before this, the desire was to attract foreign students in order to diversify the university campus populations so the Japanese students would learn more about and become more comfortable dealing with non-Japanese people and cultures, enabling them to go out into the wider world for their work after graduation. Also, these foreign students were predominantly from other Asian countries, where many of these jobs would be and which bolstered Japan's relationships with these nations.

With Japan's economy weakening, the Japanese government decided that it needed to attract the best students possible from overseas to help reverse this trend. And so, universities were strongly encouraged to further develop their EMI programs and to expand them into the graduate schools. At the same time, the government also strongly endorsed providing EMI programs for Japanese students in order to have them become better at English, better at understanding foreign people and cultures, and better able to function in international situations. This is the two-pronged EMI approach the Japanese government has been pushing, hoping it will help to renew Japan's global economic competitiveness: attract top foreign students to Japan and better prepare Japanese students to function effectively in their future work overseas and/or with non-Japanese in Japan.

The Results

There has not yet been much research conducted concerning these EMI classes and programs, especially in Asia, or in Japan in particular. However, much of what has been reported so far reveals multiple difficulties in terms of carrying out such courses and programs and in achieving the stated goals. Of course, these are early days for EMI in much of Asia, including Japan, and improvements may emerge in later years. However, certain problems are clear and should have easily been anticipated and pre-empted. What follows is a discussion of ones that have been identified in the literature so far.

When a school is preparing a new program, it is important for the faculty to have a good understanding of the reasons for it and to be convinced of its usefulness. Whether the impetus for this change is from a portion of the faculty or from the administration, the faculty members need to be provided with rationale for the proposal and, if necessary, attempts must be made to persuade those who are doubtful or who disagree that this change will be good for the school and its students and that it will be possible for the faculty and school to carry out this new plan successfully. All faculty members must at least feel that they were informed well enough to understand what will happen, why it will happen, what the expected goals are, and how it will alter or not alter their work and work circumstances. With many of these new EMI-type programs, it seems that transparency throughout the faculty has been lacking.

A school is not a manufacturing company. A manufacturing company creates and delivers goods that the workers produce. Its functions are primarily in the economic sphere, providing others with things they need or want. A school enriches students' bodies, minds and souls, helping them to find the path and to prepare for their future lives and their future work. It is an entity primarily involved in the cultural-spiritual sphere and is best carried out when teachers have the freedom to do in the classroom and with their students what they decide is best for them at each moment they are together. The precise details about how to make and deliver a product can be laid out beforehand and then followed at least almost exactly. Teaching can rarely be carried out according to plans with such precision.

Any significant change in a school will impact the entire school community, even if involves only a relatively small number of faculty members and students. The well-being of all the students, faculty members, and staff will be affected by any new program that is implemented, as will the interpersonal interactions and relationships among var-

ious members of these three groups. And it is these interactions and relationships that are the driving forces behind education and learning. If they are affected in negative ways, the amount and quality of the students' learning will also be reduced.

The main impetus for these EMI courses and programs in Japan has been suggestions, more like directives, and financial support from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). However, very few universities received this funding. The rest have tried, and continue to try, to find funding from other branches and levels of government and from private enterprise, and to procure funding from other budgets within the school, in order to be able to comply with these suggestions. Therefore, the initial inspiration for these EMI programs was not from within the universities, and the initiative for nearly all of them has not been from faculty members. In most cases, administrative bodies from outside and inside the schools have forced these programs onto the faculties and pushed the plans forward, often with little real input from the majority of the faculty members, including those who will be directly involved, and with little information being shared until plans are fairly firm. This top-down, authoritarian manner of constructing these programs cannot do other than cause antipathy to arise in the faculty members. It also lessens the chances of successful implementation, as the faculty members are the ones who know best about the students and their own teaching and abilities and who must carry out the plans.

English Language Abilities and Intercultural Awareness

The pink elephant in the room concerning EMI (or CLIL) classes in Japan is English language ability. To have classes be taught in English requires both teachers and students to be at a sufficiently high level of ability and comfort in using the English language. At present, very few Japanese students enter university with English language abilities equal to the task of studying academic content classes in English. It is also true that very few Japanese professors are able to or would want to teach their field of study in English. Until now, even universities that specialize in teaching foreign languages have had most of their academic content classes taught in Japanese. Yet, universities all over Japan have created or are now creating such programs in all different fields of study. Of course, if the students and professors are all Japanese, there is not much trouble, because both can rely on Japanese when there is confusion or misunderstanding, even though theoretically they should not. However, in many cases, the students are not

all Japanese and the professors also are not all Japanese, and some these non-Japanese are not able to understand or use Japanese well.

Taking in content in a foreign language one does not have excellent abilities in is extremely difficult. It is very hard, closer to impossible, to maintain concentration and to understand what one is listening to or reading in a foreign language without very strong abilities in that language. Without such abilities, no one is able to do it hour after hour after hour, which is what is required if one is studying at university. It is difficult enough to do in one's own language, not to mention a foreign language. Although university-bound Japanese high school students have had experiences reading very short passages in English and have had some experiences listening to very short aural English texts, conversations and lectures, usually from recordings, most have not tried anything remotely close to what is expected of a university student and do not have such abilities.

A major hurdle for Japanese students concerning English that is less difficult for students from many other countries to overcome is listening comprehension. One reason is because the Japanese sound system is much more limited than most languages while the English sound system is quite extensive, particularly in vowels. In addition, Japanese words almost never end in a consonant sound, while many words do in English, and in other languages. Another difficulty for Japanese students is that many English sounds are blended with or altered because of other sounds that surround them, which is not common in the Japanese sound system. On top of these difficulties for Japanese in listening to English, a huge problem is that in elementary school, Japanese students learn a Romanized version of their syllabary using the letters used for English. This makes it very difficult for many Japanese students to later learn how to hear or pronounce English words and sentences correctly when the letters and words are not pronounced in the same way as they are in Romanized Japanese.

As a student, there is also the need to take action; to ask and to answer questions, to engage in discussions, to make presentations, to do at least Internet or library research, and write essays and papers, short and long. Most Japanese students have little, if any, experience with these oral and written behaviors or tasks in their high school studies, especially in English. Mostly, they have listened and memorized, and questioning has been discouraged in most, if not all, of their classes, not just in English classes. Most students have only done exercises and answered questions provided by their textbooks and teachers. Free style oral and written work is uncommon in Japa-

nese schools. Japanese schools and society at large have also taught Japanese students, especially when in a formal group discussion, not to speak up unless given individual, explicit permission to, not to appear to know or be able to do something others do not or cannot, not to say something unless one is very certain one is correct, both in content and in form, not to voluntarily provide information or ideas or opinions, not to state one's own opinion or belief, not to disagree with someone, not to repeat something they already said or heard someone else say, for example, in a conversation, not to speak about themselves. These are all hindrances to successful communication and discussion and to successful completion of written assignments in classes carried out in English, at least by non-Japanese teachers.

Many Japanese professors teaching in English have many of these same difficulties, along with the added stress of being in front of the classroom as the expert and responsible for the collection and presentation of much of the class content. The psychological difficulties for many are very challenging to overcome. Also, teaching in English requires much more preparation for most Japanese professors than if they are teaching in Japanese. Not only do they need to find material appropriate for the students in English, they also need to learn and become comfortable using appropriate English classroom language and to learn new ways to conduct their classes to accommodate students from other countries, who may require more interaction, with the professor and among themselves, and less sitting in silence and listening and who may communicate in ways that are different than the ways Japanese do.

At least some of these language- and culture-related problems do not concern only the Japanese students in these EMI programs. Many of the non-Japanese students, who are mostly from other Asian countries, have some of the same challenges for similar reasons, as well as other, different problems. In addition, they are living in a foreign country, not in their own country, and want and need to learn Japanese and about Japanese culture and society. If they have been accepted to study at a university without having already lived in Japan and learned Japanese, they need extra assistance with many things relating to their daily life, not only their school life. Foreign professors, who are hired from overseas and have not had experiences with Japanese language or people, have many of these same difficulties and needs. Therefore, schools must have administrative workers, who have the knowledge and abilities to deal with people from other nations concerning issues related to both their school-related issues and their daily lives,

specifically assigned to assist students and professors from abroad. Otherwise, these students and professors will not perform up to their abilities.

Another issue for both students and professors from overseas, if they have not already been living in Japan, is feelings of isolation. These feelings naturally negatively impact their studies and work, respectively, and their lives. These feelings of isolation can also arise in the Japanese students and professors involved with these EMI programs because they are usually a small part of the school and are often kept somewhat separated from the rest of the programs physically and organizationally. These programs are different from the others in many ways. Some have different schedules than the other programs, and usually they require more money and resources than the other programs. Not only is being different regarded negatively in Japanese society, at least unconsciously, but professors in other programs sometimes resent and feel envious of the extra money, resources, and attention given to these EMI programs.

Of course, all of these issues can have a negative impact on the quality of these programs compared with equivalent programs carried out in Japanese. This is also noted in the literature that has been published so far. Unsurprisingly, courses tend to cover less material and in less detail and depth than in usual courses. This cannot be avoided unless at least most of the students are strong enough in English to attend a university in an English-speaking country, which is rarely the case.

Related Matters

It is worth noting that much of this concerning EMI courses and programs in Japan is very similar to the way other relatively recent initiatives driven by MEXT or its predecessor were or are being carried out. Relating directly to English language teaching, beginning not long ago, MEXT announced a new round of various changes. Among these, first, were that in the last few years of elementary school, students would have to study English. Before this, students began studying English in junior high school. More recently, it decided that students in the early elementary school years will soon also be required to study English. In addition, high school teachers will be expected to teach their classes in English, which has not been the case. English classes at all levels in Japan have, for the most part, been taught in Japanese. As with EMI programs across Japan, these changes did not come from the wishes and requests of teachers or schools, who were, for the most part, also not part of the prior discussions.

Such plans look great on paper, and they seem to be reasonable, until one considers the teachers. Until now, none of these teachers has been required to even be able to speak English, not to mention teach in English. Elementary school teachers have not been required to gain any sort of expertise at all in English. Also, the government has provided very little funding or time or opportunities for these teachers to learn the English and related things they will need to know and to prepare themselves for this new endeavor in order to be successful. This will not be good for them and will not enable their students to have the experiences and learn what they are expected to. Proper groundwork has not allowed for or provided for these programs to be built on solid foundations. The paperwork has been completed without actually preparing the setting, which is the teachers and the students.

Most universities have gone about their implementation of EMI programs in similar ways. Usually, administrators have made the plans without carrying out needs analyses beforehand and with little input from most faculty members. Adequate time, opportunities, and funding have rarely been provided in order for Japanese professors to have the opportunities to increase their English abilities to the necessary levels and to learn about intercultural differences that will certainly impact classroom behavior and expectations and interpersonal communications. Professors hired from overseas have often not been informed that their students may not be as proficient in English as the students they are used to and have often not been prepared to teach classes in which the students are not really capable of studying in English at the same level as students in the countries the professors come from. As just mentioned, and earlier, many of the students, Japanese and non-Japanese, in these programs do not actually have the English abilities or the classroom interaction capabilities to function well in an English-only classroom. Integration of these students and EMI teachers, especially those who are new to the school, with the rest of the school's community has often not taken place, leading to their feeling isolated. Teachers in other programs have often not been informed about what is going on in these EMI programs that receive a disproportionate amount of attention and funding, leading to feelings of resentment. These are all serious problems that must be solved in order for Japan's universities to carry out their EMI endeavors successfully.

Conclusion

Unless a student's English abilities are minimally at the level of TOEFL iBT (Test of English as Foreign Language: Internet-based Test) 72 or CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) B2 or higher, it is very unlikely that s/he will be able to follow academic content lectures in English well enough understand and learn the material presented, i.e., to truly benefit from EMI courses. Even paying attention to such lectures will be a great challenge for most students whose English abilities are even at this level. In fact, the students should really have much stronger abilities than this to study in an EMI program and gain from it what a native speaker of English would. A university program truly committed to having its non-native-English speaking students understand the content lecture courses it offers in English should have a rigorous ESAP component. Each of these lecture courses should have a supporting ESAP course connected with it. The teachers of the ESAP courses would attend the content lecture classes, discuss the content with the lecturers, and create materials and tasks and carry out lessons appropriate for the level of the non-native-English speaking students in order for them to be able to understand and acquire the knowledge of the content lectures in English. These supporting classes would need to be held some days after the original classes and taught in a manner more suitable for non-native-English speakers to better enable them to learn the required material. Or, the courses should be planned and carried out as CLIL courses. In this case, the teachers would need to be fluent in the students' native language and in English.

From what has been published so far concerning these EMI courses in Japan, it seems that there are many aspects in need of improvement. The chances of success for such programs would be greatly enhanced if needs analyses were carried out beforehand, in order to avoid having unrealistic expectations for the programs as a whole and for what the professors and students can do and accomplish, and continually. If insufficient numbers of qualified professors or students are able to be hired or enrolled, respectively, then opportunities, time, and money must be made available for them to gain the various kinds of knowledge and abilities required to participate adequately in EMI courses. Attention must also be given to the fact that cultural/diversity problems will arise and will need to be addressed with understanding and compassion. In addition, the university needs to ensure that the students and professors in EMI programs are integrated into the school community as whole.

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