

Exploring Tensions between Curricular Goals and Learner Expectations in EFL Education

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Abstract

This paper examines how the application of curricular objectives in the language classroom, intended to internationalize non-native speakers of English, may have an adverse effect on learners, particularly if such objectives conflict with personal motivations for language acquisition. In such cases, neither the learner nor the international community of English speakers is served when imposing objectives that are not in line with learner expectations of English usage for interaction with or access to native-speaking culture. This paper, therefore, proposes a paradigm shift in which educators balance top-down imperatives against the particular needs and desires of language learners.

Introduction

In the age of globalization sweeping Japanese society, high school and university EFL curricula have been designed around the central premise that proficiency in English (and to a much lesser degree, other languages) is an internationalizing force. Fluency in a language other than Japanese, according to this narrative, provides speakers access to the rest of the world in terms of opportunities for prosperity and intercultural understanding. Given the potential benefits of internationalization, a number of scholars (i.e. Matsuda, 2003; Horibe, 2008; Miyazato, 2009) are eager to advocate education policy decisions that may or may not be in line with how the general public in Japan perceives English.

As lofty as this objective sounds, it is not clear whether language learners in Japanese EFL education generally pay any more than lip service to such beliefs, at least with regards to opportunities for interaction in English with other non-native speakers. Alternatively, it is possible that a significant portion of learners may be pursuing English, if not merely to fulfill educational requirements, for more self-serving or parochial reasons that do not relate to English for purposes of globalization. In a time where evidence is abundant that language education has achieved, at best, mixed success in Japan, it is worth exploring whether the shortcomings of EFL education can be attributed to curricular motivations that are not in line with the reasons that learners choose to study English.

In so doing, such a narrative may open up larger inquiries as to whether a top-down approach to education, where classroom objectives are defined mainly, if not exclusively, by perceived societal needs, is the best approach in all situations and contexts. As education at a local level becomes more connected with the larger, more globalized world, it is important for educators to determine a healthy balance between decisions made by education policy makers and expectations set by learners. In examining this dichotomy, this paper will focus specifically on aspects within language education, particularly the historical, and political struggles among disparate stakeholders that may, in fact, no longer be relevant to today's learners.

Historical Background

Few academics refute the strong Western-centric orientation of traditional EFL education in native-speaking countries in the period immediately following World War II. Most aspects regarding the spread of English-speaking culture and ideology to the rest of the world have been viewed as self-serving and opportunistic, absent in substance of any real imperative to truly foster globalization (Vlahos, 1991) or intercultural communication (Pennycook, 1994). Language education in Japan during the Cold War has long reflected this Western slant. Horibe (2008), for example, has noted how EFL textbooks in Japan implied a connection to the acquisition of English to acquisition of economic prosperity through the practice of American customs and exposure to American culture.

Despite this, English has nonetheless spread to all parts of the world and grown into the modern international language. Kachru (1992) is among the earliest academics to note the various non-native-speaking varieties of English that have developed independently of native-speaking influences. Under Kachru's World Englishes model, the large and still-growing Outer and Expanding Circles of non-native-speaking countries that use English have, for much of the post-World War II era, eclipsed the native-speaking Inner Circle countries in terms of the number of English users, if not ownership of the direction of EFL education. Put another way, academics such as Holliday (2005), Kubota (2002), and Matsuda (2003) have noted that, while English has become more internationalized in the past three decades, EFL education in some non-native-speaking countries has not yet kept pace with such a changing paradigm, and has instead maintained a Western-centric perspective that continues to invite oversimplification of cultures and parochial worldviews among learners.

In the face of this disconnect, these scholars are noted for their advocacy of English as an international language (EIL). The introduction of EIL to non-native-speaking countries provides educators in these contexts the prospect of fostering English communication without the influence of native speakers or Western ideology. The exact nature and implementation of EIL in non-

native-speaking contexts, however, are questions that academics should carefully consider.

Internationalization in EFL Education

There is little doubt that certain contexts benefit from an orientation toward EIL. Countries such as India and Nigeria have arguably more stable varieties of English than do countries such as Japan or Korea. Among non-native-speaking countries with more established dialects, learners may pursue English study for the opportunity to interact in areas of those societies where English is a necessity.

This stands in contrast to those contexts such as Japan where English can be considered as beneficial but not necessary. In such contexts, acquisition of English provides access to more prestige job opportunities and interaction within the greater international community, but ultimately is not required for daily life outside of the classroom. The important nuance in this distinction is that, in the latter context, while the ability to use English provides a greater chance at economic prosperity, a lack of English proficiency does not necessarily exclude one from attaining such prosperity. Therefore, unlike in countries such as Japan, EIL appears to be more relevant in countries with more established non-native-speaking varieties of English.

Scholars who, nonetheless, advocate English as an international language (EIL) in Japanese EFL education have long cited curricular goals of internationalization as a rationale for promoting a less parochial, more global form of English education. In Japan, the most recent Course of Study for foreign languages, published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2008) as a guide for secondary school contexts, reads as follows:

Materials should be useful in deepening the international understanding from a broad perspective, heightening students' awareness of being Japanese citizens living in a global community and cultivating a spirit of international cooperation. (p. 8)

Matsuda (2003) refers to similar guidance in previous Courses of Study as evidence of a perceived top-down imperative to internationalize English for the preparation of non-native-speaking English learners in an increasingly globalized world. This follows other imperatives for promoting international English varieties in non-native-speaking contexts, which include preservation of linguistic diversity (Modiano, 2001) and intervention against linguistic imperialism (Pennycook, 1994). Under this narrative, the need for internationalization appears so urgent that competing narratives to the contrary are viewed as insignificant or narrow-minded.

The practical implications for internationalization along the narrowest readings of the guidelines set in the Course of Study are potentially significant for EFL education in Japan, which

has traditionally viewed internationalization largely as alignment toward English-speaking countries rather than toward the greater international community (Kubota, 2002). Horibe (2008) has stressed that EFL education shift its focus away from native-speaking varieties of English and toward Asian varieties that, he believes, Japanese learners of English are more likely to encounter outside the classroom. Miyazato (2009) advocates, among other proposals intended to mitigate the influence of native-speaking assistant language teachers in junior high schools, that policy makers consider hiring more teachers from countries generally not considered native-speaking, so that learners are given exposure to a greater variety of English dialects from around the world. Such proposed initiatives seem to indicate the potential wholesale changes that academics viewing Japanese EFL education in the abstract seek to enact.

However, lost in this push towards a focus on curricular objectives set by policy makers at a macro level is proper consideration of not merely the indigenous circumstances that educators face in the Japanese language classroom, but also the unique circumstances that each and every learner brings to the classroom. It has to be explored whether Japanese learners of English are compatible with these imposed goals of internationalization, let alone whether such learners agree with the these goals at the outset.

Learners' Exposure to and Perspectives of English

Far more than in previous generations, Japanese learners of English are exposed to English outside of the classroom in greater frequency and greater intensity. While it is arguably not necessary for Japanese to attain English fluency to participate in their society, English does indeed play a more ubiquitous role in Japanese culture now than in the past. English popular media (television, music, movies, and literature) is within easy access of most, if not all, Japanese people. Personal computers and smart phones provide that access more easily and more instantly than had previous technologies, allowing Japanese people more constant contact with English than at any other point in history. Contrasted with the non-essential nature of English proficiency among other English users within Japan, it is possible that intercultural understanding is less of a concern among Japanese learners of English than is communication with or enjoyment of native-speaking English culture.

At least two studies corroborate this supposition. Benson (1991) conducted a survey study of Japanese university students, who generally expressed a greater preference for knowing English to “enjoy entertainment more” than knowing English to “pass university exams” or to “learn foreign points of view on Japan.” Conversely, a more recent study of junior high school students (Rapley, 2010) rated knowledge of “other cultures and world affairs” second-lowest among eight listed abilities that students may want to gain from English education (other higher-rated abilities

included “giv[ing] a self-introduction in English” and “talk[ing] about daily life in English”).

Tensions between Curriculum and Learner

The current literature on EFL education seems to place a greater focus on what educators believe is necessary for their learners to achieve, rather than what learners themselves want to attain from their time in the language classroom. As such, there is evidence in a number of studies on Japanese EFL education that suggest that the disparity between top-down expectations expressed by policy makers for EFL curricula and bottom-up expectations held by learners leads to tension for both learners and educators alike. Indeed, when the two ends of the continuum between internationalization and Western focus are directly posited, the latter appears to be preferred by learners, contrary to the goals that educators may seek to emphasize.

Omi and Fukada (2010), for example, presented a paper on a survey study of university students indicating that, even though students believe that nativeness (that is, proficiency in a native-speaking variety of English) is not necessary for communication, they also desire such nativeness for themselves. Miyazato (2009) noted in her study that junior high school students seemed to prefer native-speaking teachers to their Japanese-speaking counterparts, highlighting the power struggle that Japanese teachers of English seem to face even when they, according to Miyazato, possess more international experience (i.e. travel abroad, proficiency in more than one language).

Matsuda (2003) comes to a similar conclusion after interviewing students who preferred native-speaking varieties of English even after being made aware of the existence of non-native-speaking varieties as well as the potential benefits of attaining proficiency in such varieties. Despite such findings, both Miyazato and Matsuda remain adamant that internationalization be imposed on learners, insisting that those learners and, in Matsuda’s words, the “general public” are largely ignorant of the full nature of English, and need to aggressively be made aware of English as an international language, regardless of any possible preferences to the contrary.

Kubota (2002) is harsher in her criticism of non-educator stakeholders in Japan, who view internationalization as learning English, which she judges as a Western-centric endeavor that ultimately perpetuates “colonial” attitudes against non-native-speaking cultures. This touches on historical arguments that, when addressing measures to prevent further perceived linguistic imperialism on Japan, are arguably irrelevant considering that native-speaking English culture has long taken root in contemporary Japanese society and similar non-native-speaking contexts (Sybing, 2011). Regarding the argument in this paper, it remains to be seen whether learners are aware of these political struggles or, more importantly, whether such awareness is beneficial or relevant to their study of English, given the potential reasons for which they decide to study the

language. Even if Kubota's assertion is taken at face value, educators are presented with the reality that some language learners undoubtedly view English through a Western-centric lens, and thus pursue the acquisition of fluency in English for purposes relating to native-speaking society.

Whether this is a reality that should be corrected or accommodated, is a central focus of this paper. Matsuda (2003) argues for correction, implying that a curriculum with an international focus is appropriate for the Japanese EFL context, and that deviation from this orientation requires intervention in the form of raising awareness within the general public about the benefits of a stronger orientation towards internationalization. This researcher is of the opinion that, if attaining English fluency, regardless of rationale or expectation on the part of the learner, is the ultimate goal of EFL education, then all other considerations regarding linguistic imperialism or linguistic diversity must be considered secondary to the pursuit of that goal and potentially superfluous to the needs and circumstances of the language classroom. As such, when learners bring to the classroom expectations about English as an endeavor that grants them access to the native-speaking realm, educators are best served by a curriculum that best those negotiates expectations.

Benefits of a Student-centered Approach

The term "student-centered" has long been a buzzword in EFL education, if not education in general, and has been applied to many different concepts to the degree that it potentially escapes general definition. For the purposes of this paper, it refers to the approach that educators take when setting goals and expectations for the language classroom. This is in contrast to an approach that centers on top-down curricular objectives, but the use of such a dichotomy should not be meant to imply that the two ends are exclusive to each other. It is interesting, at this point, to note that it is difficult to find evidence of learner preference toward EIL; McKay's research in Chile (2003), for example, surveyed only non-native-speaking English teachers for their views, which naturally indicated a strong preference toward EIL and non-native-speaking varieties of English. This paper can only stress that a balanced approach between policy goals and learner preferences should be seen, in terms of fostering language proficiency, as preferable to an approach that ignores one over the other. However, it is helpful to emphasize what benefits that due consideration of learner preferences and backgrounds brings to language education and the facilitation of language acquisition.

Education in at least the last quarter-century has sought to de-emphasize the "assembly line" approach to teaching and learning. The U.S. National Research Council (2000), detailing a series of proposals for the reform of American public education, writes the following:

Teachers must pay close attention to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that learners bring into the classroom. This incorporates the preconceptions regarding subject matter already discussed, but it also includes a broader understanding of the learner. (p. 23)

In addition to this, the NRC makes a similar observation about how learners bring expectations from outside the classroom:

If one-third of [students'] time outside school (not spent sleeping) is spent watching television, then students apparently spend more hours per year watching television than attending school. A focus only on the hours that students currently spend in school overlooks the many opportunities for guided learning in other settings (p. 26).

Of course, it is valid to point out that such proposals are narrowly addressed to American education, and not directly to any aspect of EFL education, let alone EFL education in Japan. However, it is difficult to dispute that Japanese learners of English today are undoubtedly exposed to English outside of the classroom, and it is questionable at best to ignore such a circumstance when addressing how best to facilitate language acquisition among learners.

Several examples found in the literature regarding the connection between culture and language have noted examples of educators seeking to connect with students based on their preferences for native-speaking culture. Cheung (2001), citing textbooks overly focused on grammar that proved uninteresting with students in Hong Kong, proposed the use of popular culture in materials, not with the intention to impose any belief onto non-native speakers, but to motivate them to study English. Sybing (2010) documented interviews with native-speaking teachers who sought to apply native-speaking culture in different ways, but all under the rationale of raising motivation or reaching learners with familiar schemata. Such observations can only reinforce the possibility that, because of the strong association between English and its native-speaker culture, a direct treatment of internationalization in the language classroom may not interest or engage learners of English as deeply as a native-speaker orientation would.

The Place for Internationalization in EFL Education

The internationalization of English in the last half-century, of course, cannot be ignored, and learners could certainly benefit from an awareness that English is not merely an endeavor restricted to native speakers. Horibe (2008) cautions against treating non-native-speaking varieties of English in an abstract manner, but educators should also consider the practical concerns of treating both native- and non-native-speaking varieties of English in an equally comprehensive

fashion. In the language classroom, with limited time and significant challenges to bring language learners to fluency, it may prove problematic to address all curricular objectives if the need to equally consider learner preferences is also apparent. While this paper posits that the urgency of internationalizing EFL education is possibly overstated, given the full array of concerns that language educators face, the need for such internationalization nonetheless exists, and teachers would be remiss if some awareness-raising of EIL, while not the panacea that scholars frame it to be, were not present in the language classroom.

Educators should also be especially sensitive to elements in EFL education that arguably foster inaccurate or oversimplified worldviews among learners of English. Matsuda (2002), for example, is rightly critical of EFL textbooks whose representations of English users may create an impression that English is only for native speakers, and that non-native speakers are valued less in English communication. Approaches to English that are inclusive and accurate (or at the very least, not misleading) are essential to an education that is conducive to intercultural communication. This paper only argues that learner preferences, in tandem with curricular objectives, should inform educator decisions rather than reinforce that which may prove detrimental to language acquisition or intercultural understanding.

Moreover, the argument for native-speaker orientation is irrelevant when learners and policy makers do agree on objectives for the language classroom (as is arguably more the case in Outer Circle countries, where English plays a greater role in everyday life and learners may be more inclined to study English for purposes of intercultural communication). In such a case, there is evidence that indicates that the presence of native-speaker culture, contrary to the expectations of learners, may indeed create anxiety and hinder language acquisition (Alptekin, 1993). The important point in this argument is that a focus on internationalization for its own sake or the sake of defined curricular objectives absent of how learners expect to approach English is arguably unproductive.

Conclusion

Policy makers and educators need to consider the appropriateness of the current curricular orientation in Japanese EFL education, not merely with respect to the needs of Japanese society, but also with respect to the expectations and preferences of its language learners. It may be that Japanese education requires learners to be more internationally-minded in an era of increasing globalization, but it must also consider the fuller range of reasons that learners become interested in studying English. Faced with the possible disparity in rationales for studying English, it then becomes a question of whether policy makers should prescribe such specific societal changes through curricular reform, especially if such changes create unnecessary obstacles to fluency in

English.

Exploring why learners should study English is an important task for educators and policy makers, but a singular focus on this question without consideration of other questions (such as why learners study English, and how educators can best achieve success in their classrooms) assumes an outdated paradigm that suggests that learners exist in a vacuum outside of the influence of native-speaking culture. A more practical approach considers what learners expect to accomplish and what beliefs and goals learners bring to the classroom. Addressing these questions may ultimately prove more beneficial to Japanese EFL education.

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