

Article

The Importance of EFL Proficiency in Japan

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Key Words

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Outline

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the importance of teaching English language communicative proficiency skills to foreign language learners (FLLs), particularly in Japan. The traditional methods of instructing students attempting to acquire a second language have in recent decades come under close scrutiny. Today's English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom is significantly different from that of the mid-to-late twentieth century. At issue herein is an analysis of the critical changes taking place in second language construction and some strategies that are most likely to succeed in facilitating the improvement of English language proficiency learning by non-native speaking (NNS) EFL students.

Section one of this paper begins by providing a basic overview of EFL instruction in general and methods of instruction used specific to Japan. Section two discusses various obstacles preventing EFL learners from acquiring more adequate English language proficiency. Section three discusses EFL learning programs in Japan and recommends specific improvements that can be made to traditional pedagogy to improve the proficiency of Japanese NNS learners.

1 Overview of EFL Instruction

This section gives a brief overview of EFL instructional methods and strategies used for EFL Proficiency learning. Section 1.1 presents a background several contemporary strategies currently being used for EFL learning. Section 1.2 describes various traditional instruction methods still being used for EFL learning. Section 1.3 describes EFL instruction and methods used for EFL learning specifically in Japan.

1.1 Contemporary EFL Trends

A comprehensive analysis of global trends in language learning in the twenty-first century was conducted by Eaton (2010) who argued that since much learning takes place through conversations, conversation should be a critical element in any EFL instructional effort targeting NNS. According to Eaton (2010), among the critical trends in this field are:

- Linking language learning to leadership skills.
- Using various Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) to facilitate language acquisition.
- Use of stories and speech and other forms of oral expression to enhance communicative capacity.
- Individualized learner centered approaches to instruction.
- The use of benchmarks, frameworks, and so-called asset based assessment strategies.

- A movement away from an overemphasis on grammar, memorization, and rote learning to the use of language and cultural knowledge to ground understanding of language within its appropriate cultural context.

As illustrated, many of these trends are being employed in a wide variety of K-12 and university second language classes worldwide with respect to many different languages (Eaton, 2010). Although these contemporary trends apply more directly to instructional methodologies adopted for EFL and English as a Second or Other Language (ESL/ESOL) than for other languages such as French, Spanish, or German, they remain the same regardless of the target language being taught. Consequently, many of the changes occurring in foreign language learning pedagogy can be seen as universal rather than specific to any one particular culture or language.

Other researchers have agreed that there is a universal paradigm shift occurring in second language education (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001). Some point out one critical variable reshaping methods towards EFL learning as the emergence of new language learning and teaching technologies that make it possible for students to learn on the go by using mobile devices (Kohn, 2007). Others have emphasized the importance of demonstrating that every language is embedded in at least one if not more cultural milieus and ensuring that NNS students are cognizant of the ways in which culture affects language use (Soontiens, 2004). Still others caution that it is not necessary to eliminate all aspects of traditional second language instructional methods in order to capitalize upon new technologies and new understandings of how students are most likely to acquire meaningful proficiency in using a non-native second language (Eaton, 2010).

There is no real sense among linguists and language instructors that traditional classroom strategies being used in NNS programming need to be eliminated (Soontiens, 2004). However, a closer look at traditional methods may inevitably lead one to draw the conclusion that incorporating new elements into traditional EFL instruction can be beneficial and should be seriously considered. With this in mind, the following section discusses a few of the basic traditional methods used for EFL instruction to NNS students.

1.2 Traditional EFL Instruction

A great deal has been written about strategies and methods used for teaching EFL or ESL. Two commonly used strategies include: 1) **presentation, practice, and production** (PPP), and 2) **engage, study, and activate** (ESA). Both of these strategies have over time become entrenched in the training of EFL teachers themselves (TEFL teacher training, 2018). Both of these two strategies of EFL instruction are discussed separately.

The first stage of PPP (presentation) describes a process where the target language is presented to NNS students by an instructor who elicits language from them with cues to determine what they already know. This includes identifying vocabulary depth and breadth, understanding of grammar and syntax, and even pronunciation. The second stage of PPP (practice) is where students practice their target language in multiple activities that range from structured to less structured tasks that ideally tend to focus on verbalization. The third stage of PPP (production) is where student talk occupies as much as 90 percent of the time with the production component of an individual lesson consisting of 20 to 30 percent of the total lesson time (TEFL teacher training, 2018).

The ESA strategy is also a staged methodology that is similar to PPP with the exception of permitting movement back and forth between the stages and a stress on the engagement of students early in a lesson. ESA appears on balance to be more suited to motivating students with respect to verbally participating in learning activities (TEFL teacher training, 2018). Both PPP and ESA strategies, however, have been described as requiring instructor maintenance of a language classroom in which pedagogy is managed within a general context of understanding what motivates students to learn a second language (Kazemi & Soleimani, 2016).

Teaching styles may vary from the rigid approaches to interventionists to the more flexible approaches of non-interventionists and interactionists. Interactionists have a tendency to be focused on the mutual give and take that can take place between learners and their environment (Kazemi & Soleimani, 2016). In this sense, it has been suggested that effective EFL teachers acknowledge that they must structure their pedagogy and classroom management approaches to the context in which they teach and the needs of their students. In the foreign language learning classroom where English is used both as the medium of exchange and the context of teaching, EFL teachers must maximize the learners' willingness to communicate in English (Kazemi & Soleimani, 2016).

Many EFL teachers appear to focus mostly on what could be described as the fundamental mechanics of English as a language: vocabulary, grammar, syntax, punctuation, and so on (Kelly, 2013). Pronunciation and the ability to orally communicate effectively in English as a foreign language is not always a key objective within such instructional environments. Some early research has recognized that in many contexts, including that of Japan and other Asian cultures, conversational and communication patterns and rules linked to culture and language are quite different than their counterparts in English (Kresovich, 1989). In this sense, EFL teachers in such settings have a strong need to retrain their students with respect to these issues which are more

likely to be problematic in oral communication than in written communication which is often more formal and task or goal oriented.

Among the common tools used in EFL programming is the oral presentation which may or may not be used as a group project (Leichsenring, 2010). Presentations often include both written and oral components to allow EFL learners in various stages of mastery to participate. Other instructional strategies commonly employed by EFL teachers include both formal and informal assessments of language skills. These can include both self and peer assessments as well as instructor feedback (Kubota, 1994; Leichsenring, 2010). Invariably, modeling of both pronunciation and elements of structure by EFL teachers is an integral element of the traditional EFL programming (Kelly, 2013). Teachers often give students examples to follow individually and as a group.

Many of the standard strategies used in adult education are also common in EFL classes for NNS learners who are older (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Adult pedagogy emphasizes the intrinsic motivation that tends to drive performance among older students. This particular set of theories – which is not the focus of this study – also calls for cognizance of the reason why an EFL student participates in a program and what the student expects the program to do for him or her either academically or professionally. Consequently acknowledging the role played by motivation in EFL learning is critical regardless of the context (Kelly, 2013).

1.3 EFL Instruction in Japan

EFL programming in Japan is actively promoted by the Japanese Ministry of Education (Hashimoto, 2009). From elementary school through secondary and university programming, EFL is one of the key components of the educational curriculum in Japanese schools. While Japan has not indicated a desire to make English a quasi-official national language, the reality is that by actively requiring students throughout their educational careers to participate in EFL classes the Japanese government has in fact mandated the mastery of a second language for its people (Hashimoto, 2009). Consequently, most Japanese who have navigated the educational system through secondary school have at least some basic understanding and level of proficiency in English – at least with respect to reading and writing if not necessarily with respect to oral communication which involves both listening and speaking (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013).

Government support for EFL programming in Japan is a critical aspect of English proficiency learning. Such support is linked in part to the Japanese government's interest in the processes of internationalization and globalization and is also facilitated by the provision of EFL programming for people working in various Japanese businesses that increasingly require English language

competency (Hashimoto, 2009). While this need is generally recognized, many Japanese often express resentment regarding this insistence of learning English. In some cases, this feeling is linked to concerns regarding the perceived vulnerability of Japanese culture to Westernization in general and Americanization in particular. Consequently, there is often a feeling of resistance to the use of Americans and other non-Japanese EFL teachers in Japan (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013).

Despite large efforts made by the Japanese government to raise citizens with English abilities through adoption of mandatory curriculum, a sense that English has relatively little value in the context of Japanese society and culture tends to undercut government and academic support for EFL programming (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Overall, it would appear that there are numerous concerns impacting upon the provision of EFL programming to Japanese university and secondary school students. As discussed on the following section, various barriers exist making it difficult for a majority of EFL learners in Japan to improve their EFL proficiency to a level of being able to communicate with a high degree of accuracy.

2 Barriers to EFL Proficiency in Japan

This section discusses various obstacles making it difficult for EFL students in Japan to improve their communicative English proficiency skills. Section 2.1 discusses general barriers created by the EFL learning environment and instructional methods used. Section 2.2 discusses the competitive evaluation system in Japan placing an over emphasis on grammar-translation rather than effective EFL proficiency learning. Section 2.3 discusses an overall lack of motivation towards effective EFL proficiency learning.

2.1 Classroom Learning Environment

Although most Japanese study English for over 6 years in school from the age of 10, their command of conversational English is often very low (Pullman, 2018). The Japanese EFL classroom has been described by as an environment in which student attitudes are influenced by a lack of any sense of immediacy with respect to using English as part of their daily communication activities (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Japanese students are often generally anxious and reticent when it comes to such EFL learning activities as initiating conversations, volunteering to speak even in response to teacher queries, raising new topics, or challenging teachers in English.

Japanese culture itself has an important influence impacting the willingness or lack thereof on the part of NNS Japanese students to acquire proper listening and speaking skills in English as evidence of proficiency. This is characterized in part by a unique culture that values indirect speech over direct speech, places an emphasis on face saving, is more group oriented and non-confrontation, tries to avoid competition, and prefers teacher centric styles of instruction in the

classroom (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). This culture of silence and in directedness makes its very difficult for NNS students to speak up in the traditional EFL classroom learning environment in Japan. Additionally, the sheer number of students in each class makes it challenging and rather difficult for students to have individual quality time to communicate with instructors and to receive any type of immediate feedback.

Another important factor influencing the English proficiency of EFL students at secondary and university levels in Japan is the nature of Japanese English (JE) in and of itself. The use of JE in the classroom is described as a very different approach to English which imposes various limitation on conversational interactions including quick turn arounds and a large use of repetitions and back channeling (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). In fact, a surprisingly large number of Japanese English teachers are unable or unwilling to speak English while teaching in the classroom and alternatively use broken forms of JE or mostly Japanese as their medium of exchange with students. This type of classroom environment is a particularly concerning problem for helping improve EFL learner proficiency.

Many Japanese students and even teachers who think mostly in Japanese while trying to use English for conversation practice has a rather difficult time speaking English with proper linguistic speech fluidity, intonation and rhythm. Additionally, even many Japanese who are familiar with the basic elements of English phonetics have a tendency to pronounce English using Japanese syllables (sometimes referred to as *katakana* English) rather than English syllables needed for clear pronunciation. These tendencies cause problems for EFL learners when trying to communicating verbally with native speakers in not only having their own words understood but also in understanding what English speakers are trying to say to them.

Additionally, many EFL learners in Japan exhibit disunity in learning styles as is the case elsewhere and varying degrees of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation with respect to acquiring EFL proficiency. EFL learner programs are oftentimes extremely varying in degrees of emphasis on different aspects of English skills. Oftentimes, there is little to no pre-testing of English language skills or dividing students up into different classes according to their varying degrees of proficiency. Students may study English in a variety of EFL classes from a variety of teachers, but oftentimes, there is little to no coordination amongst their teachers towards a unified goal of achieving maximum fluency in English on behalf of their students.

As discussed in the following section, another major factor affecting the ability of EFL proficiency involves the competitive evaluation systems of English ability adopted in Japan for classroom assessment and for determining school admissions in Japan.

2.2 Competitive Evaluation Systems

The use of competitive evaluation systems in Japan is both a motivation for learning English and also a demotivation for students to acquire any high level of spoken EFL proficiency. Japanese EFL learners' lives are constantly burdened by evaluations that ultimately determine their futures, thus giving rise anxiety that is connected to strict evaluations (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). For this reason, Japanese EFL learners and their instructors tend to focus more on language tasks such as reading and writing in which competency is assessed against different standards than those applied when verbal communication is used and evaluated.

Japan is a test-driven society that almost seems to discourage speaking up in the classroom. Japanese language learners consider classroom interactions as evaluative strategies and oftentimes react rather negatively to interactive communicative practices (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Although students study EFL for many years in school, many teachers require students to translate texts focusing mainly on English grammar and vocabulary comprehension for passing entrance exams. This is clearly detrimental to developing communicative EFL proficiency practices in the classroom. The main problem with this is that English taught in Japanese schools places too much emphasis on rote memorization and the testing of reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary, with little opportunity for students to use what they have learned in the EFL classroom to actually practice speaking English.

Far too often, English is viewed by teachers and institutions in Japan as merely an academic subject or tool for academic success rather than an actual means of communication used by people around the world. Although a strong basis in English literacy is necessary for good test performance, many students find the teacher-centered instructional translation methods of learning rather boring and often lose motivation for trying to speak up in English. This lack of motivation for speaking English as discussed in the following section should be a major concern for any EFL program trying to educate students to have good English speaking capabilities.

2.3 Lack of Motivation for Proficiency

There appears to be a general lack of motivation towards EFL proficiency for a large majority of EFL programs and students studying English in Japan. Those Japanese EFL learners who do appear to be motivated to acquire English oral proficiency measured by proper pronunciation, sentence structure, the use of syllables as learning blocks, and understanding of cultural contexts are those students who anticipate a career requiring overseas placements (Kelly, 2013). Japanese students who are intrinsically motivated toward achieving conversational proficiency are

differentiated from their peers by this particular expectation and by the fact that they are intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated.

Language anxiety is a critical factor that impacts upon Japanese EFL learner motivation in Japan (Cutrone, 2009). Many EFL students appear to exhibit very distinct fears about speaking English, particularly in public. For many Japanese students, mastering English pronunciation appears to be particularly challenging. Part of the problem has been identified as the fact that in Japanese formal English instruction, teaching pronunciation appears to be peripheral in secondary schools (Tominaga, 2011). Because this is the case, Japanese EFL students who arrive in universities may have increased fear of speaking due to their previous failure to have acquired comprehensible pronunciation in EFL settings. Many Japanese EFL teachers in Japan themselves prefer to use Japanese as the medium of classroom learning instead of English for a large majority of class time which has an impact on student learner motivation to speak.

Research by Siato (2011) and Siato and Siato (2017) affirmed that the failure to provide Japanese EFL students with meaningful pronunciation instruction is responsible for much of the anxiety that Japanese students exhibit when called upon to converse in EFL classes. This issue is seen by Cutrone (2009) as one of the key barriers to the acquisition of English language proficiency by classroom based EFL students. While competitive attitudes and a lack of personal motivation may be at work in fostering anxiety, a substantial body of research indicates that Japanese EFL students often fail to acquire global or comprehensible performance or to achieve appropriate suprasegmental (word stress, rhythm, and intonation) development (Siato & Siato, 2017). The following section will take a look at some concrete examples of different ways to improve the EFL proficiency of NNS learners in Japan.

3 Improving EFL Proficiency in Japan

Given the current state of EFL instruction in Japan, this section discusses methods used and gives specific recommendations for strategies that will help improve proficiency skills for EFL learners and EFL instruction in Japan. These includes a greater emphasis on reading English texts out loud, increased emphasis on pronunciation practice and increased use of authentic English materials for increased proficiency learning.

3.1 Increased Use of Reading Out Loud

One important strategy for improving the English Proficiency of EFL learners is an increased adoption of reading aloud exercises in the classroom. Many of the EFL programs at the universities in Japan tend to include some reading and listening activities undertaken in the belief that listening can help to improve pronunciation. However there is not as much emphasis placed

on reading out loud (ROL) as there is on reading while listening (RWL). Far too often, teachers simply play a sound track of the text being read out loud by someone else while students in class simply read along silently without ever opening their mouths. It would be far more effective to spend quality time reading texts out loud for fluency.

Research by Cato and Tanaka (2015) supports the notion that recent advances in neuropsychology have evidenced a facilitative role of sensorimotor activity for the development of a second language speech perception. These researchers examined the relationship between reading aloud (RA) performance, grammatical knowledge, and listening ability with a sample of 31 college level Japanese EFL users. They found that second language knowledge per se correlated with listening capacity particularly among less proficient listeners. However, production accuracy and fluency in English were found to be facilitated by second language listening activities that included required reading out loud.

Similar research by Gobel and Kano (2014) explored the implementation and evaluation of a one year reading while listening (RWL) program for first year Japanese university students. The program was specifically created to give students necessary practice in listening to a large volume of spoken English. The researchers theorized that the lack of such elements in EFL programming was a major contributor to the anxiety experienced by Japanese EFL learners as well as their challenges in acquiring proper pronunciation as well as an understanding of conversational implicature.

Gobel and Kano (2014) found that silently reading while listening by itself had a significant effect on reading rate and vocabulary recognition but not for general English communicative proficiency. Other researchers, such as Shinozuka, Shibata, and Mizusawa (2017) commented that a read out loud instructional program recently tested in a Japanese EFL settings has promise for improving both proficiency and pronunciation in addition to reading comprehension. This program was designed to augment the more traditional grammar, translation and lecture memorization instruction method of teaching that has formed the basis of so many Japanese EFL programs for decades. As described by Shinozuka, et al (2017), the new read aloud instruction program includes adoption of the following major activities:

- Slash/chunked reading practice.
- Repeated read aloud practice.
- The cloze test.
- Simultaneously read aloud and write out practice.

Shinozuka, et al (2017) conducted a study in which 32 participants with an elementary level of EFL proficiency, completed a pretest and a post-test as well as a motivation survey. Separating the pretest and post-test were three months of intensive instruction using the aforementioned methodological components. Results reported by the researchers indicated that scores of proficiency on the post-tests improved significantly. However, no change was found in terms of motivation to acquire EFL competency. As an EFL learning strategy, the researchers concluded that the read aloud methods adopted helped to encourage participants to use more mental processes but that their return to more traditional classroom instruction did not exhibit any carryover effect.

Other research on listening and reading in the EFL curriculum helps to highlight the importance of reading out loud as a method of enhancing pronunciation production. Amin, Amin, and Aly (2011) examined the correlation between EFL students' strategic listening and their listening comprehension skills and pronunciation skills. Using a sample of 80 secondary school students, and a variety of reliable and valid instrumentation assessing strategic listening, Amin, et al (2011) found that there was a positive and significant relationship between strategic listening and listening comprehension. However, Amin, et al (2011) did not find that pronunciation of English words and phrases improved to the same extent that listening comprehension skills improved.

What this tends to affirm is that while strategic listening in and of itself is a necessary component of any effective EFL learning program, it does not necessarily help students generate significant improvements in spoken pronunciation. Such improvements are more likely the artifact of conversations in which students are required to verbally interact not only with other students, but also with native English speakers (Blight, 2002). Requiring students to read out loud is a good first step toward building up confidence in speaking English with the ultimate goal of having students communicate freely in English as opposed to merely reading texts.

Saito (2007) also agreed that Japanese EFL learners experience difficulties in learning English pronunciation. This is especially apparent in segmental phonology because Japanese students must learn many phonemes in English that do not exist in the Japanese language but which are essential in English. Reading English texts out loud helps in verbalizing the written text, but many times the pronunciation of words is based on a limited phonetic JE vocabulary instead of proper English pronunciations. Additionally, there are almost twice as many speech sounds (phonemes) in English than what is actually represented by the 26 letters of the English alphabet and their varying combinations, which makes it very difficult for NNS learners to decipher into

proper pronunciation. Consequently, more emphasis should be placed on practicing English pronunciation in EFL classrooms to help overcome such difficulties.

3.2 Increased Use of Pronunciation Practice

In order to improve EFL proficiency, the importance of teaching NNS students in Japan proper English pronunciation cannot be overstated. There is a tendency for Japanese students to learn how to pronounce English words using JE based phonetics instead of proper English phonetics. This is a problem in that most native English speakers unconsciously use phonetic syllables as the basis of all communication. Put simply, native speakers use phonemes that make up syllables as the basis for speaking and listening of spoken words. In fact, native speakers think of words in English using syllables and not spelling. Spelling only comes into play in written forms of English usage. Despite this fact, most Japanese are taught the meaning of words in English and forced to learn their meanings and spellings by rote memorization without having a clear understanding of their proper pronunciation by syllables.

Japanese EFL classes seem to give very limited attention to teaching proper English pronunciation or try to develop effective strategies to ameliorate the problem. Saito (2007) conducted a study with four subjects in an experimental group who were given explicit phonetic instruction via computer generated visual feedback and two subjects in a control group were not exposed to this instruction. All six Japanese EFL students continued after the study to struggle with their pronunciation of the English specific vowel /ae/ but the explicit phonetic instruction provided to four of the students resulted in dramatic pronunciation improvements.

Saito (2007) therefore recommended the use of specific phonetic instruction for EFL learners in Japan who do not have the opportunity to use English on a daily basis or to participate in real world, real time conversations with native English speakers. Interestingly, Saito (2007, 2011) emphasizes the fact that the lack of native English-speaking instructors in many Japanese university EFL classrooms itself is a factor which directly impacts upon pronunciation inadequacies. A very small percentage of Japanese EFL university classes are led by native or near native English speakers. This raises an important question as to whether or not sufficient attention is given to EFL proficiency in selecting these teachers.

An important distinction should be made between the English proficiency of Japanese students who have had an opportunity to live and study abroad in English speaking countries with those whose exposure to English is almost entirely based on instruction in the EFL classroom (Kelly, 2013). The critical difference of course is that the Japanese students who are exposed to English while living abroad in an English-speaking country have more of a discerning need to acquire

conversational competence for every day interactions with other people who they cannot communicate with in Japanese. They also become more attuned to various subtle differences in pronunciation as well as conversational implicature. This is clearly reflected in their improved pronunciation and ability to communicate more effectively in English using both formal and colloquial structures and vocabulary upon returning to Japan.

It is impossible for EFL study in Japanese universities to completely replicate the total immersion experience provided to students who live and study overseas in English speaking countries for extended periods of time. Nevertheless, it is entirely possible to offset some of the limitations by creating multiple opportunities that require more verbalization from students in the EFL classroom such as oral presentations, play building, conversational scenarios, and other related activities requiring students to speak up (Leichsenring, 2010). Creating opportunities for students to work in groups where members have different levels of proficiency can also allow students with higher proficiency levels to help those with lower proficiency.

Given the aforementioned, helping Japanese EFL learners overcome their fears and anxieties should take a prominent role in EFL classroom instructional methods to help improve their EFL proficiency. Overcoming the cultural norms in Japan of silence and reticence is a challenging task because these traits are deeply ingrained in Japanese people from an early age (Cutrone, 2009). One way to overcome this problem is to increase the use of native or near native English speakers as instructors in EFL classrooms and let them use English as the medium of instruction as much as possible. It is even possible to allow more native English instructors to work in language laboratories helping Japanese EFL students with their EFL conversational proficiency to work in cooperation with non-native Japanese instructors.

There is much to be gained from increasing the exposure of Japanese students to native English instructors whose pronunciation can be modeled as part of the EFL learner experience. For this and other related reasons, the following section discusses the need for EFL students to have increased exposure to as much authentic English learning content as possible.

3.3 Increased Use of Authentic Content

One important way to help increase the EFL proficiency of NNS students in Japan is to increase their use of authentic English content for exposure to English used in real world settings. Even with all the emphasis placed on reading and writing in EFL programs throughout Japan, there is a surprisingly a very low number of Japanese who try and spend time outside of the classroom reading books and newspapers or similarly related materials in English. Similarly, there is a wide variety of AV media in English available in Japan which is not being taken advantage of. Many

movies and TV shows with original English soundtracks are often broadcast on TV channels with Japanese sub-titles or masked in Japanese without even allowing viewers the option of choosing the original English soundtrack without any sub-titles.

The use of rented or purchased DVDs of movies and TV shows with original English soundtracks is one way to increase exposure to authentic English content for EFL proficiency learning. You can use menu options of DVDs sold in Japan with dual soundtracks to change sub-title and soundtrack options to English instead of Japanese. For learners who aren't as comfortable with English only content at first, they can watch the same movies or TV shows first with Japanese sub-titles and Japanese soundtracks, and eventually change both to English upon future repeat viewings. Once NNS EFL learners have watched a movie or TV program once in Japanese or with Japanese sub-titles, it becomes much easier for them to follow the meaning of the content spoken in English. Turning English subtitles on when available is yet another way to follow English content that is difficult to pick up by merely listening.

In addition to an increased use of AV media available in English, there is a wide variety of new technologies that are reshaping the entire field of EFL instruction in both the secondary and university learner environments (Eaton, 2010). Amongst these, the use of mobile devices for EFL programming has become a particularly increasing component of effective instruction today that is not used as widely as is desirable (Kohn, 2007). EFL programs in Japan should continue to place more emphasis on using such technologies that can help deliver authentic English language content to EFL learners both inside and out of the classroom.

The addition of mobile technologies and the use of smart phone apps in particular to the EFL university curriculum has gained support. However promising this app technology is, its use appears to be more determined by opportunity, personal preference, and motivation (Mindog, 2016). Such recognition, though limited, tends to paint a portrait of EFL programming as encompassing a fairly traditional educational orientation with the exception of the inclusion of new ICTS as tools for spurring performance and achievement (Kelly, 2013). There is evidence that Asian students are particularly responsive to content delivered through ICT including videoconferences, Internet based modular classes, and mobile language laboratories (Wu, Yen, & Marek, 2011). The use of such technologies both in and out of the classroom allow students more exposure to authentic English content that will help improve their EFL proficiency.

Research on effective English pronunciation learning systems specifically for Japanese students has been conducted. One research team, for example, developed an English pronunciation learning system that estimates the intelligibility of Japanese learners' speech and then ranks their errors in

comparison to native speaker pronunciation (Tsubota, Dantsuji, & Kawahara, 2004). Such research found that Japanese students exhibited acoustically broader speech patterns than native English speakers and exhibited supra-segmental errors quite commonly. The research team recommended using video clips to facilitate virtual conversation and moving to conversational interactions with native English speakers. In essence, these analysts were of the opinion that one must move from diagnosis of critical pronunciation errors to the provision of real world opportunities for conversational interaction with native English speakers (Tsubota, Dantsuji, & Kawahara, 2004).

Conversational implicature also sits at the center of any effort to improve EFL instruction in Japan. The teaching of conversational implicature through explicit explanations of rules should also be combined with consciousness raising tasks (Kubota, 1995). Exposure to a pragmatic system may be a crucial factor to induction and may also be advantageous with respect to helping EFL learners to process language on their own. In this context, when Japanese EFL learners find themselves immersed in English speaking countries or groups, they experience real difficulties understanding forms of implicit meaning that do not match their own internalized expectations for social interactions.

All cultures and languages have their own ways to communicate nonliteral meanings through a range of implications that are only understood through the use of conversational implicature. The failure of Japanese EFL programs to emphasize authentic conversational practice in the classroom is therefore a critical concern for picking up on these slight subtleties and nuances (Blight, 2002). An increase in EFL proficiency learning in the classroom should help EFL learners overcome many of these misunderstandings taken from the literal meaning of words rather than their actual implied or intended meanings.

In summary, a combination of a variety of different techniques and learning strategies is necessary in order to foster conversational proficiency and fluency in pronunciation and communication in English among Japanese EFL learners. Placing increased emphasis on reading out loud and pronunciation practice for conversational practice are particularly important as spoken English contains many phonemes and digraphs that are not readily found in Japanese. The more EFL learners practice to say English words and phrases out loud in context, the more they will improve their EFL proficiency. Additionally, EFL learners should use as much authentic English content as possible in lessons to understand both literal and implied meanings of conversational English as used in various contexts. An increased use of ICT and other digital media can help provide students with quick and easy access to such authentic learning materials for EFL proficiency.

CONCLUSION

Reading and writing a language is only half of achieving linguistic fluency. Modification of EFL instructional methods must be made in order to help improve the overall English language proficiency of NNS students in Japan. Adopting specific strategies for enhancing Japanese EFL students' mastery of English proficiency is clearly necessary. Additional research towards this end should focus on the use of intensive conversational programming where more interaction with native English speakers is involved. As long as EFL classes are simply an academic requirement in which success is measured through assessment of reading, writing and grammar, it is highly unlikely that most students in Japan will be comfortable communicating orally in English with their social, professional, and academic peers. Mastery of a language is not limited to being able to merely read or write that language. Both universities and businesses should continue to adopt necessary measures to increase opportunities to increase the conversational proficiency of EFL learners in Japan.

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