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Creating a Multilingual and Multicultural Learning Environment: A Case Study of a Japanese Culture Course at a College Level in Japan

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More and more international students come to Japan to study. Data shows that they tend to face learning related difficulties. Our study's goal was to determine whether or not the English and Japanese hybrid class has created a multilingual and multicultural learning environment. Pre-instructional and post-instructional surveys were taken by the students taking the class, and the data was compared between high achievers and non-high achievers, and between Japanese students and international students. The results show that high achievers and non-high achievers, and Japanese students and international students all had positive perceptions of the class contents and instruction in Japanese and English. These findings tell us that the English and Japanese hybrid class provided meaningful and purposeful opportunities for creating a multilingual and multicultural learning environment for all groups and students. This was achieved by contextualizing relevant and appropriate topics and themes, such as social and cultural characteristics and issues of Japan and utilizing the target languages of English and Japanese for hybrid instruction.

Keywords: multilingual, multicultural, hybrid, Japanese, English, EFL

1. Introduction

Despite the effort of the Japanese government to improve the English proficiency of students, a survey in 2016 covering 12,850 public junior and high schools in Japan revealed that 36.1 percent of the students had achieved an English proficiency equivalent to Grade 3 or higher on the Eiken Test in Practical English Proficiency, which was down 0.5 point from the previous year and well below the government's goal of 50 percent (Aoki 2017). The Eiken test, which comprises seven levels, with Grade 5 being the lowest, is widely used in Japan for official certification of English-language ability. What is more disappointing is the low English language ability of freshmen college students who just graduated from high school. Their English language ability does not get any

better after studying English as required subjects in junior and high school for eight years. In her study, Fushino (2011) argues that despite several years of enrollment in oral communication classes in junior and senior high school, many students continue to hesitate to communicate in English in university classrooms. This explains why the English-speaking ability of people in Japan is one of the lowest in Asian countries (ETS 2011). In the study of Kyaw (2017) comparing the English language ability of Myanmar students and Japanese students, she cited literature stating that even Myanmar students had higher TOEFL iBT scores in reading, writing and listening. Specifically, her own findings showed that Myanmar students are better English writers than Japanese students. Given these recent literature reviews, the English language issues in Japanese schools seem to be becoming larger. With the recent trend of more foreign students coming to Japan, we will see more challenging tasks ahead for language teachers, curriculum planners and school administrators. To help address the issues, the Japanese government reportedly has encouraged universities to hire more English-speaking professors and increase the number of Japanese language classes for foreign students. However, we believe that a sound language policy, that serves as a guide to developing a sound language curriculum, which is the focus of our study, is important because it ensures that all learners, regardless of language and cultural background, develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they will need if they are to flourish in life, learning and work, now and in the future in this era of globalization. The following sections explain multilingualism and multiculturalism in Japan.

2. Background of the study

2.1. Multilingual and multicultural classrooms in Japan

It has been pointed out that international students face learning related difficulties when they come to Japan to study. Currently in 2018, there were about 267,042 international students, including those enrolled in Japanese language institutes (JASSO 2018). This number is low compared with the number of international students studying in the United States and the United Kingdom, but Japan is considered as the top destination in Asia. A survey conducted by Ikeguchi (2012), which included 100 Chinese students in several Japanese universities regarding their learning adjustment problems revealed that a majority believed that the Japanese language is difficult to understand and use (81%). The respondents (77%) also said that Japanese classes were not interesting and enjoyable. In a recent ethnographic study conducted by Lee (2017) involving four international students from Vietnam, Philippines, Brazil, and China, data shows the participants' difficulties in communicating with native speakers, understanding lectures, and writing essays in Japanese. With more international students coming to Japan to study, we expect additional and similar challenges in the classrooms to happen. It is the goal of our project to develop a curriculum which will provide a multilingual and multicultural learning environment beneficial for both Japanese and foreign students. The first part of the project was the development of the hybrid language materials which we tested on a group

of Japanese and foreign students. The section that follows explains the hybrid language materials that we developed.

2.2. Hybrid language materials

The purpose of the Japanese Civilization classes where the hybrid language materials were used was to examine Japan from social and cultural perspectives, such as daily customs, social problems, religion, and history. In these classes, we logically but flexibly discuss various issues and concerns, trying to find possible directions that the nation should take both domestically and globally. The material goals are 1) Learn the social and cultural characteristics and issues of Japan through various unique topics, 2) Acquire knowledge via both Japanese and English, 3) Understand the content and develop students' thinking through listening, speaking, reading and writing activities, 4) Collect information beyond the textbook, using other sources, and 5) Work with other students in order to achieve their own learning goals.

We designed the materials in such a way that we observed what Howard & Major (2004) believed to be informed guidelines for designing effective English language teaching materials. These guidelines are not only applicable to English but also other languages, such as in the case of Japanese. One guideline is that language teaching materials should be contextualized. This means keeping to the fore during the design stages the objectives of the curriculum, syllabus or scheme within the designer's institution. Also, it is important to contextualize the experiences, realities and first languages of the learners. Lastly, materials should be contextualized to topics and themes that provide meaningful, purposeful uses for the target language. These should be chosen on the basis of their relevance and appropriateness for the intended learners, to ensure personal engagement and to provide motivation for dipping further into the materials. The second guideline is that materials should provide situations where learners need to interact with each other regularly in a manner that reflects the type of interactions they will engage in outside of the classroom. The third guideline is that language teaching materials should encourage learners to develop learning skills and strategies. These learning skills and strategies will enable them to become independent learners. The fourth guideline is that language teaching materials should have appropriate instructions. Effective instructions means writing them in language that is appropriate for the target learners, and using the correct metalanguage can assist with making instructions more concise and efficient.

Topic 8: My Dear “Beloved Pets” (愛するペット様)

Pets are becoming more and more popular recently in Japan. What comes to your mind, if you are asked to name some famous pets and popular animal characters? You encounter them everywhere in Japanese life, since they are cute friends and comforting companions to those who love them dearly.

A

Warming-up ウォーミング・アップ

1. Information インフォメーション

日本人の動物たちに注ぐ愛情には目を見張るものがあります。シャンプーやカットはもちろん、最近では、スパにつれていきマッサージを受けさせる人もいるそうです。家ではペットを飼えない、という人は、「ペットカフェ」に通うこともできるようです。

- [1] Write animal names in English and Japanese.
動物の名前を英語と日本語で書きましょう。
- [2] Check the box(es) of the animal(s) if you think their pet cafes are available. 「ペットカフェ」があると思う動物にチェックしましょう。

例) (猫 / cat)



1) (/ dog)



Figure 1. Sample hybrid language materials

3. Our study

In our study, we compared high achievers with non-high achievers, and Japanese students with international students with respect to the following research questions.

1. What are students' expectations of the English/Japanese hybrid class?
2. What are students' perceptions of the English/Japanese hybrid class before taking it?
3. What are students' perceptions of the English/Japanese hybrid class after taking it?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

A total of thirty-two students who took a Japanese Civilization class participated in the pre-instructional survey. Twenty-one were high achievers, eleven were non-high achievers, eighteen were international students, and fourteen were Japanese students. In the post-instructional survey in the same class, a total of thirty-eight students served as participants. Twenty-four were high achievers, fourteen were non-high achievers, nineteen were international students, and the other nineteen were Japanese students. The participants' groupings of high-achievers and non-high achievers are based on the grade that they received in the class. Students with a grade of 90% and higher were classified as high-achievers while those with a grade of 80% and below were classified as non-high achievers. International students were from China, Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam.

4.2. Research instruments

We utilized pre- and post-instructional surveys to gather the data for this study. The pre-instructional survey was administered before the start of the class in the 2017 fall semester, while the post-instructional survey was given at the end the class in that same semester.

5. Results

1. *What are students' expectations of the English/Japanese hybrid class?*

Table 1: Reasons for taking the English/Japanese hybrid class: high-achievers and non-high achievers, Japanese and international students

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Interested in contents	15 (71%)	8 (73%)	9 (64%)	14 (78%)
Can learn both in Japanese and English	4 (19%)	2 (18%)	2 (14%)	4 (22%)
Want to interact with international students arstudents	7 (33%)	0 (0%)	7 (50%)	0 (0%)
Want to interact with Japanese students	15 (71%)	2 (18%)	0 (0%)	14 (78%)
Follow others	5 (24%)	2 (18%)	0 (0%)	7 (39%)
Overseas experience/preparation preparation	0 (0%)	1 (9%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)
Other	3 (14%)	5 (45%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

As seen in Table 1, the majority of both high-achievers (71%) and non-high achievers (73%) said that being interested in the contents of the hybrid class was the reason why they took the class. On the other hand, there are two reasons where both groups differed greatly. 33% of high-achievers wanted to interact with international students, while none of the non-high achievers were interested in such interactions. The same is true for interacting with Japanese students. 71% of high-achievers wanted to interact with the Japanese, but only 18% of the non-high achievers were interested in such interactions.

The Table also shows that the majority of both Japanese students (64%) and international students (78%) said that being interested in the contents of the hybrid class was the reason why they took the class. There are three reasons for taking the English/Japanese hybrid class where both groups differed greatly. A total of 50% of Japanese students wanted to interact with international students, but no international student was interested in interacting with their fellow international students. A total of 78% of international students wanted to interact with Japanese students, but none of the Japanese students felt likewise with Japanese classmates.

Table 2: Expectations of taking English/Japanese hybrid class: high-achievers and non-high achievers, Japanese students and international students

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Learn about Japan	16 (76%)	11 (100%)	12 (86)	15 (83%)
Improve Japanese skills	6 (29%)	6 (55%)	3 (21%)	9 (50%)
Improve English skills	3 (14%)	1 (9%)	4 (29%)	0 (0%)
Interact with international students	6 (29%)	2 (18%)	6 (43%)	1 (6%)
Interact with Japanese students	11 (52%)	1 (9%)	2 (14%)	15 (83%)
Other	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

As far as expectations of taking the English and Japanese hybrid class were concerned, the majority of high-achievers (76%) and all non-high achievers (100%) chose learning about Japan (Table 2). Non-high achievers (55%) and high-achievers (29%) differed greatly in their responses concerning improving Japanese skills. There was also a significant difference in their response as to wanting to interact with Japanese students (high-achievers: 52%, non-high achievers: 9%).

The data also shows that 83% of international students and 86% of Japanese students cited learning about Japan as their primary expectation. They greatly differed in the following expectations, namely: improving Japanese skills (international students: 50%, Japanese students: 21%), wanting to interact with Japanese students (international students: 83%, Japanese students: 14%), and wanting to interact with international students (international students: 6%, Japanese students: 43%).

Table 3: Perceptions of taking the English/Japanese hybrid class before taking the class: high-achievers and non-high achievers, Japanese students and international students

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Good	19 (90%)	5 (45%)	9 (64%)	15 (83%)
Prefer Japanese only	1 (5%)	4 (36%)	2 (14%)	3 (17%)
Prefer English only	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I'm not sure	0 (5%)	2 (18%)	3 (21%)	0 (0%)

Table 3 reveals that high-achievers and non-high achievers differed greatly in their response about using the English/Japanese instruction hybrid class, with 90% of high-achievers and only 45% of non-high achievers believing it is good.

The data also shows that the majority of international students (83%) and Japanese students (64%) had a good perception of the use of instruction in the English/Japanese in hybrid class.

Table 4: Knowledge about Japan

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Improvement	15 (62%)	12 (86%)	16 (84%)	11 (58%)
Slight improvement	9 (38%)	2 (14%)	3 (16%)	8 (42%)
No improvement	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

After taking the hybrid class, 62% of high-achievers and the majority of the non-high achievers (86%) believed that they improved their knowledge about Japan (Table 4). The same is true for Japanese students and international students. Regardless of grades, the majority of Japanese students (84%) and more than half of international students (58%) thought that their knowledge about Japan improved after taking the class.

Table 5: Confidence in English

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Gain	6 (25%)	0 (0%)	2 (11%)	4 (21%)
Small gain	14 (58%)	9 (64%)	9 (47%)	14 (74%)
No gain	4 (17%)	5 (36%)	8 (42%)	1 (5%)

Table 5 shows that high-achievers felt more confident about the use of English (Gained: 25%, Gained a little: 58%) than non-high achievers (Gained: 0, Gained a little: 64%).

Also, the international students (Gained: 21%, Gained a little: 74%) gained more confidence in English than the Japanese students (Gained: 11%, Gained a little: 47%) did.

Table 6: Confidence in Japanese

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Gain	7 (29%)	5 (36%)	4 (21%)	8 (42%)
Small gain	15 (62%)	5 (36%)	9 (47%)	11 (58%)
No gain	2 (8%)	4 (29%)	6 (32%)	0 (0%)

As far as confidence in Japanese is concerned, only 29% of high-achievers thought they gained confidence, while 62% believed that they only gained 'a little' (Table 6). On the other hand, non-high achievers were split in their responses (Gained: 36%, Gained a little: 36%). Regardless of grades, many international students (47%) and Japanese students (58%) gained a little confidence in Japanese. While many international students thought that they gained confidence in Japanese (42%), many Japanese students believed that they did not gain confidence in Japanese (32%).

Table 7: Understanding of various cultures

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Improvement	17 (71%)	8 (57%)	12 (63%)	13 (68%)
Slight improvement	7 (29%)	4 (29%)	5 (26%)	6 (32%)
No improvement	0 (0%)	2 (14%)	2 (11%)	0 (0%)

Table 7 shows that generally students regardless of grades and nationality groups felt that the class deepened their understanding of various cultures (High-achievers: 71%, non-high achievers: 57%, Japanese students: 68%, International students: 68%), but the tendency was observed more among students who are high-achievers (71%).

Table 8: Instructional material

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Easy to understand	15 (62%)	13 (93%)	15 (79%)	13 (68%)
Relatively easy to understand	9 (38%)	0 (0%)	3 (16%)	6 (32%)
Hard to understand	0 (0%)	1 (7%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)

Table 8 shows that generally participants found the instructional materials easy to understand ((High-achievers: 62%, non-high achievers: 93%, Japanese students: 79%, International students: 68%). It is worth noting that many high achievers (38%) and international students (32%) found the instructional materials relatively easy to understand.

Table 9: Instruction in Japanese

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Easy to understand	21 (88%)	13 (93%)	19 (100%)	15 (79%)
Relatively easy to understand	3 (12%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	4 (21%)
Hard to understand	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The data in Table 9 shows that both high-achievers (88%) and non-high achievers (93%) found the instruction in Japanese language easy to understand. All Japanese students (100%) found the instruction in Japanese language easy to understand, and the majority of international students (79%) agreed as well.

Table 10: Instruction in English

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Easy to understand	15 (62%)	3 (21%)	6 (32%)	12 (63%)
Relatively easy to understand	9 (38%)	9 (64%)	11 (58%)	7 (37%)
Hard to understand	0 (0%)	2 (14%)	2 (11%)	0 (0%)

As far as instruction in English are concerned, more than half of the high-achievers (62%) and international students (63%) thought that the instruction in English was easy to understand (Table 1-10). On the other hand, more than half of the non-high achievers (64%) and Japanese students (58%) believed that instruction in English was only relatively easy to understand.

Table 11: Comments and opinions about the use of English and Japanese

	High-achievers	Non-high achievers	Japanese students	Int'l students
Positive about the use of E/J	23 (96%)	10 (71%)	16 (84%)	17 (89%)
Preferred using Japanese only	1 (4%)	4 (29%)	3 (16%)	2 (11%)
Positive about the use of E/J	23 (96%)	10 (71%)	16 (84%)	17 (89%)
Preferred using English only	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The data in Table 11 shows that almost all high-achievers were positive about English and Japanese instruction (96%) compared to non-high achievers (71%). On the other hand, Japanese students (84%) and international students (89%) were also positive about the use of English and Japanese in the class. One third of the non-high achievers (29%) preferred the class being conducted in Japanese only. No students wanted English only instruction.

6. Results

One interesting finding worth noting is the interest in the contents of the hybrid language class presented by all groups. Regardless of grades (high achievers and non-high achievers) and nationality groups (Japanese and international), generally, the participants indicated they were interested in the contents as the reason and expectation for taking the class. These reasons and expectations were supported by their positive perceptions of the contents after taking the class. They believed that their knowledge about Japan and understanding of various cultures improved. They also found the topics interesting and instructional materials easy to understand. By utilizing topics such as Japan's life customs, social problems, religion and history, we were able to integrate one of the language material design guidelines, which Howard and Major (2004) suggested, namely that materials should be contextualized to topics and themes that provide meaningful, purposeful uses for the target language. We also made sure that the hybrid materials were relevant and appropriate for the students, which ensured personal engagement and provided them with motivation for dipping further in the materials.

Regarding the use of English and Japanese as medium of instruction, it's worth noting, too, that high achievers were consistent in their positive perceptions before and after taking the class. Non-high achievers were split with their perceptions before taking the class but became more positive with their perceptions afterwards.

Both Japanese and international students had positive perceptions before and after taking the course. We can argue that the hybrid class had positive impact especially on the perceptions of non-high achievers.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the findings, we can conclude that the hybrid class had a positive impact on the perceptions of high achievers and non-high achievers as well as Japanese and international students as far as class contents and instruction in Japanese and English were concerned. By contextualizing to relevant and appropriate topics and themes, such as social and cultural characteristics and issues of Japan, and utilizing both English and Japanese during instruction, the hybrid language materials provided meaningful and purposeful uses for creating a multilingual and multicultural learning environment regardless of students' grades and nationalities. This multilingual and multicultural supportive environment enhanced and enriched the reasons and expectations of the participants to take

the hybrid language class. Materials should stimulate interaction and active language use among learners, meaning language-teaching materials should provide situations where learners need to interact with each other regularly in a manner that reflects the type of interactions they will engage in outside of the classroom. For future research on hybrid language materials or any language materials, post survey questionnaires should integrate these items.

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