

Natural Use of English in Japan

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Abstract

Languages exist to be used. However, how is English used or how can it be used in Japan naturally in daily life in Japan? In this article, I will explore the actual natural use of English in Japan, especially because there is a dearth of papers on this topic. At the same time, I will look into more possibility of natural use of English in Japan as well.

Key words: natural, use, English, Japan

Introduction

Languages exist to be used. English is used in specific countries just like Japanese is used in Japan. The same idea was held some forty years ago by a renowned applied linguist H. G. Widdowson when he claimed, “What we are aiming to do is to make the learner conceive of the foreign language in the same way as he conceives of his own language to use it in the same way as a communicative activity.” (1978, p. 159) Willis (1990, p. iii) agrees with Widdowson arguing that “(T)here is general agreement nowadays that we learn a language best by using it to do things.” In the same vein, Honna (2003, p. 194) asserts that “English becomes significant when it is used.” It is important to get things done in English under “R.O.C (real operating conditions)” (Conti, G., 2015). However, English is not necessary to live in Japan; therefore, there are not a slew of opportunities for learners of English to use the language in Japan. Teachers can teach English, and learners can learn English, practice English, take tests in English, and use English in natural and semi-natural situations in class rather limitedly, as there is not enough time guaranteed for natural use of English in class at least for the following three reasons: (1) teaching and practicing English by all means needs a plenty of time, (2) for the third-year students in junior and senior high schools, time in class is used for the preparation for the entrance examination for senior high school and university besides for learning from textbooks, and finally (3) the weekly number of English classes is limited as there are other subjects to be taught. But junior and senior high school students usually cannot use English once they leave class because English is not necessary to do things in daily life in Japan. This is a fundamental problem when we think that the English language exists to be used. Probably the fact that it is not necessary to use English in Japan may put English learners in a situation where they think that they learn and practice English and use it limitedly in order to get good scores in English tests. It may not occur to learners that English exists to be actually used. I may dare say that it may be sufficient even for some of us English teachers to teach English to learners and assist them in various activities in class and in test taking without thinking that English exists to be used. Widdowson (1978, p. 67) said, “It would seem to be the case that an overemphasis on drills and exercises for the production and reception of sentences tends to inhibit the development of communicative abilities.” However, I am not denying the value to teach English for teachers and to learn English for learners; quite contrary, it is vitally important to teach English for teachers and learn English for learners. What I am saying is that there is another angle to look at English: to use it in real life. With this angle in mind, both the teachers and learners can find what they do in class more meaningful and be more encouraged to teach and learn English with even more enthusiasm, motivation, and reality.

So, in this paper I would like to discuss how natural use of English can be accomplished in everyday life outside class in Japan, by finding opportunities to use English for many types of learners from elementary school students to university students.

I. Actual situations of junior and senior high school students

As mentioned in Introduction, the situation in many junior and senior high schools in Japan may be as follows:

First stage	Second stage	Third stage	Fourth stage	Fifth stage
Learning English	Practicing English	Using English semi-naturally and naturally	Taking tests	Use of English outside class
→	→	→	→	

However, traditionally it can be said that a lot of time in class is usually spent on the first and second stages, namely learning and practicing English, leaving not much time for the third stage, using English semi-naturally and naturally. Nakai (2010) mentions that in the PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) approach, which is often practiced in senior high school in Japan, only small amount of time is allotted to the actual use of English in the last P (Production). Sato and Tanaka (2009, p. 3) also affirm that “when learning English in a learning situation in Japan, …there is a dearth of language exposure and language use.” Let us listen to what a junior high student has to say: “…even though I learned English grammar and lectures at school but we didn’t have any opportunity to actually speak or practice conversation with foreign people…And for the students, we don’t really know the benefits of being able to speak English.” This is what he said in his speech in the Mie Preliminary of the 67th All Japan Inter-Middle School English Oratorical Contest for the Prince Takamado Trophy on October 10, 2015 held at Mie University, under the title “Importance of English Language.” I was one of the judges in the contest. Though I have not been able to find statistic data on the actual use of English by junior high school students, there is one data for senior high school students (MEXT, 2017) as follows:

Activities in English by senior high school students:

- | | |
|--|-------|
| ① English camps | 1.9% |
| ② Speeches and presentations in English | 2.6% |
| ③ Studying abroad (short stays included) | 5.6% |
| ④ No activities (no answers included) | 89.7% |

It is really a pity that almost 90% of senior high school students do not use for any activities. What we can learn from the message by the junior high school student and the data for senior high school students is that teachers must foster an atmosphere that encourages students to take the initiative and seek out English situations so that, not because teachers tell them that English is useful for them, they may come to their own conclusions, that perhaps English is beneficial to their daily lives and a skill worth developing. Also, it is of my opinion that if students use English outside the classroom in one way or another, the experience motivates them to learn English more in class realizing one of the fundamental purposes of learning languages.

II. Importance of using English naturally

Natural use of English in this paper is defined as “using English as we use Japanese in everyday life in Japan including in class.” (English is of course used naturally by Japanese outside Japan, not only in English-speaking countries but also in countries where English is used as a second language, but in this paper, the focus is placed on natural use of English in Japan.) So it means that, though Japan is not India or Singapore, English is used as a second language at least to limited extent. Many a people insist the importance of actual use of languages. Ellis (2003, p. 146) is one of them as he says:

This [Practice does not make perfect] is because practicing a structure in a mechanical way reifies the structure by decontextualizing it and thus does not affect long-term memory or lead to any change in behaviour. To change behaviour (i.e. develop automatic processes) it is necessary to provide practice of the actual behaviour itself. In the case of language learning, ‘behaviour’ must entail attempts to communicate. Thus, for practice to work it must involve learners producing the target structure in the context of communicative activity.

Also, Paul Nation (2007), as cited in Lightbown and Spada (2013, p. 118), suggests “that automaticity, which he, like Segalowitz, refers to as ‘fluency’ may be the most neglected aspect of language teaching in contexts where instruction focuses primarily on meaning.” He implies that the natural use of English is important to develop fluency.

III. Examples of natural use of English

The following are examples of typical situations in which English can be used naturally. There are of course other situations in which English can be used naturally.

- (1) Keeping a diary in English.
- (2) Reading English newspapers.
- (3) Watching or listening to news programs in English.
- (4) Watching movies in English to entertain oneself.
- (5) Reading literature in English to appreciate it.
- (6) Writing emails in English and reading emails written in English.
- (7) Helping people with directions in English.

Also, actual use of English is observed in other particular cases and can be classified into three categories as follows:

- A. Introducing areas and people in English
- B. Intercultural communication
- C. Creating special occasions to use English

I will mention specific examples for each category.

- A. Introducing areas and people in English

- (1) English newspaper

Students at Mie Prefectural Ujiyamada Senior High School of Commerce created an English newspaper introducing people, places and goods in the prefecture (The Asahi Newspaper (a), May 26, 2016, p. 23). They interviewed the governor Mr. Eikei Suzuki and Mr. Kumao Miyama, an 84-year-old head carpenter for the Ise Grand Shrine. They wrote an email to Ms. Mizuki Noguchi, an Olympian gold medalist and a graduate of the senior high school. The newspaper created by the students also carries articles on Ninja, pearls, and Matsusaka

beef among others. (See also, p. 338, Hayase, 2017.)

(2) Videos to introduce the city

An example of use of English by children can be seen in a small town in the Kansai District. According to The Japan Times (a) (2016), elementary and junior high school students in Tadaoka, Osaka Prefecture, participated in video making to introduce the city in English. The paper reports that the students received English lessons from a native speaker of English in advance.

(3) Showing tourists around a castle

Two students of a commercial high school in Matsusaka City in Mie Prefecture showed three foreigners around Matsusaka Castle in English as a practice (The Asahi Newspaper (b), April 17, 2017, p. 27). This was done through a proposal by a volunteer organization for guiding in foreign languages in the midst of an increase of foreign visitors to the city. More opportunities for high school students to guide in English are planned.

(4) Informing about Hiroshima

In an event titled “A Project to inform about HIROSHIMA”, 20 third-year junior high school students gave messages about world peace to foreign ambassadors visiting Hiroshima City to attend the Peace Memorial Ceremony (The Chunichi Newspaper, August 6, 2017, p. 29). It was the third event sponsored by the city.

(5) One-essay contest

An interesting English contest was held for the fourth time sponsored by the Board of Education of Mie prefecture in 2017. In the contest, some 800 junior high school students wrote one-page long essay in English mostly about numerous aspects of life in Mie Prefecture. Some of the topics are: “Motoori Norinaga”, “The Yokkaichi Port”, “The Ueno Tenjin Festival”, “The Ise Grand Shrine”, “Ise Tea”, and “The Hinaga Fans.” After the two-stage screening, five best essays were chosen and they were presented in Mie Cultural Center on December 14, 2017. I was one of the judges.

(6) As activities in university classes

There are at least two universities where students introduce their areas in English. In Shizuoka University (see the references), at least in 2016 and 2017, an intensive class was held in which registered students learned how to introduce Shizuoka Prefecture in English. The students had opportunities to convey the attractive points of the prefecture to foreign tourists. In the Division of Two-Year College of Shizuoka Eiwa Gakuin University (see the references), a class titled “Introducing the Local Area in English” has been held since 2009. In class, the students write essays on tourist spots and delicacies of the areas they are from.

B. Intercultural communication

(1) Students visiting the U.S. as reporters

20 students in Nagano Prefecture were to be sent to Washington and New York as reporters (The Shinano Mainichi Newspaper, June 25, 2017, p. 32). They were to visit the United Nations and other places to interview officials and people as student reporters. On June 24, 2017, 19 students out of those 20 participated in an advance study meeting to practice interviewing. In the meeting, they also had an opportunity to listen to a lecture on

American society, history and culture by the American Vice Ambassador. It was the 6th study meeting by an organization related to the Shinano Mainichi Newspaper.

(2) Interaction with young people around the world through Skype

An English teacher, Miho Horino, at Shiga Prefectural Maibara Senior High School has been engaging her students “in discussions on world news and debates on” various topics with “counterparts from 25 countries, including Vietnam, Kenya and Israel” (The Japan Times (c), January 28, 2018). Letting her students use English naturally is one purpose of this worldwide interaction, but there are two more important purposes: to encourage her students “to learn about the world on their own” and to “raise their awareness of global issues and cultural differences.” Actually, I began videoconferencing back in 1998 for my students in which they talk with American students in English on cultural topics and I included Spanish students in 2013, but I am impressed by the number of countries Horino-sensei has accumulated for her students.

C. Creating special occasions to use English

(1) English-language immersion facility

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government was to open an English-language immersion facility in Koto Ward in September 2018 (The Japan Times (b), 2017). In the program, school children from fifth-grade to high school experience daily activities such as shopping and ordering food at restaurants in English. One major reason for this program is the fact that “they (school children) grow up without having any chance to use it (English).” Akiko Mori, the director of the Metro Government’s international education section, gives more explanation as follows: “...there are very few places or opportunities for children to speak in English.” She also adds, “Even though they learn English at schools they often grow up without having any chance to use it. Thus, many can’t speak English... I hope experiences at the facility will help them to change their views toward English and to overcome their apprehension.” According to the news program WBS on Television Aichi on August 27, 2018, just one week before the opening of the facility, about 50,000 students from 370 schools already made reservations. The TV program also said that about 100 foreign staff members from 30 countries work there.

(2) English camp for elementary school students

On August 4, 2017, an English camp was held for 24 fifth and sixth graders in Matsusaka City, Mie Prefecture (The Asahi Newspaper (c), August 5, 2017, p. 23). They walked around the city and enjoyed games with ALTs. They also translated the information about Matsusaka beef and Matsusaka cotton into English so as to be able to send out the information.

(3) Interaction between elementary school students and drivers of the F1 Japan Gran Prix in Suzuka

When the F1 Japan Gran Prix in Suzuka, Mie prefecture is held, elementary school students in Suzuka City interact with drivers visiting them during the race. There is an organization called the Suzuka F1 Japan Grand Prix Regional Revitalization Council (See the references) , and they have been giving “delivery classes” about the F1 Japan Gran Prix in Suzuka and creating opportunities for interaction between drivers and elementary school students in neighboring cities at least since 2009. I still remember the proud faces of students of an elementary school some years ago showing me a letter send by some foreign drivers after they returned home. In 2018, the 30th F1 Japan Gran Prix was to be held October 4-8, and seven elementary schools including one in

Tsu city would participate in the interaction (Asahi Newspaper (d), September 21, 2018, p. 21).

These are only 11 specific examples in which English is used in natural settings, and I am sure there are similar cases across Japan, especially because the Olympic Games are slated to be held in 2020.

As to possible use of English in everyday life by Japanese in general, Honna (2003, pp. 189-191) recommends the following:

- (1) As of now, most of the announcements on public transportation like trains and buses are given by the voices of native speakers of English. Honma says that those announcements should be done by Japanese people so that foreign visitors may feel more that they are now in Japan and that they may be willing to talk to Japanese people.
- (2) The webpages of small and medium-sized hotels, Japanese inns, and tourist homes should be in English as well.
- (3) It appears that many of the promotion videos for enterprises and organizations are recorded by native speakers of English and Japanese people can replace them.

Honna remembers that after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995, he watched a video on the earthquake viewed from the standpoint of a school child. Its Japanese narration was given by a Japanese school child but the English version was given by an English native speaker. He thinks that the English narration should have been given by a Japanese school child, after some practice if necessary. Honna thinks that the Japanese child could have put more feelings into the narration. In the same vein, I have noticed in historic places and exhibition of various kinds, English translation is given to the themes or topics of the items, but the explanations are usually only in Japanese. Those explanations should have English translations.

IV. Focusing on extemporaneous talk

In the Section III above, prepared talk and extemporaneous talk are not distinguished; therefore, in each example of the actual use of English, both types of talk are mixed. In this section (IV), I would like to focus on extemporaneous talk. Spontaneous talk is defined as “an unscripted interaction, in which teachers do not know exactly what language the students will produce. The speaker, student or teacher, only has something to say as a result of having heard and understood what has been said to him/her.” (Hawkes, R. (2012), cited in All Speaking Wiki). Let us also look at another definition, which is more elaborate, by Conti, G. (2015): “it means that when an L2 learner produces speech to initiate a conversation or respond to an external stimulus they do so ‘thinking on their feet’, so to speak, without any pre-planning and without relying on any sort of support (e.g. vocabulary lists, talking mats, dictionaries, etc.).” In school from primary to tertiary level in Japan, it is not too much to say that extemporaneous talk is not much done: usually students prepare what they say in memos or manuscripts and they read from them or they memorize their talk and present their memorization. Though prepared talk is important to develop English skills, in real communication spontaneous utterance is even more necessary. “Many researchers, teachers, and learners propose that, in general, the goal of L2 instruction and learning is to develop communicative competence in learners so that they may use the L2 for spontaneous communication (Jin & Cortazzi, 2011; Littlewood, 2011; Ur, 2011).” (cited in Loewen (2015, p. 12). On February 23, 2018, when thirty-four students of the English Department, Faculty of Education, Mie University had an overnight seminar, I conducted a session on spontaneous talk in English with the students. After a brief explanation on spontaneous talk, I gave the following list of 21 topics for spontaneous talk.

Topics from my daily life

1. What I eat every day.
2. My most favorite subject and my least favorite subject.
3. Introduce Tsu City to new foreign students.
4. How I spent the 31st of last December and the first three days of January.
5. Part-time jobs I have had.
6. My favorite TV program.
7. The best movie I have seen.
8. The biggest mistake I have made in my life.
9. Introduce Mie Prefecture to new foreign students.
10. My club activities
11. Difficulties and joys of learning English
12. Three good things about Mie University.
13. I want Mie University to change this way.
14. My favorite restaurant in Tsu.
15. If I had one million yen, I would...
16. Three best places I have visited in Japan.
17. The foreign country I want to visit most.
18. My favorite video or online game.
19. My strategies to study English.
20. The theme I want to write about in my graduation thesis.
21. Topic of your own choice.

All the students gave their spontaneous talk in pairs choosing a topic of their interest. To many of them, it was their first experience to talk spontaneously on a specific topic. After the talk, I asked if there were any expressions they could not say in English, and one of the students said there was one expression and I helped him with the appropriate English. I was sure that he would remember the English expression well because that was exactly the expression he wanted to say in English, which is very different from learning expressions reading textbooks.

As I mentioned before, I have been doing videoconferencing with American and Spanish universities in English since 1998, and one of the main purposes of them is also to give opportunities to my students to practice spontaneous talk answering questions from American and Spanish students after their prepared presentations on Japanese culture (See the appendix).

Conclusion

Teachers must foster an atmosphere that encourages students to take the initiative and seek out English situations so that, not because teachers tell them that English is useful for them, they may come to their own conclusions, that perhaps English is beneficial to their daily lives and a skill worth developing.

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Appendix
Record of Videoconferencing in the Academic Year 2017

Dates	Themes	Partner Countries	Names of Partner Universities and Numbers of Participants	Participants at Mie University
2017.4.25	UNCW: Introduction of American States and cuisine, Comparison of the ways to visit someone's home in the U.S.A. and Japan, Four festivals in Wilmington Mie University: Introduction of Mie Prefecture	U.S.A.	University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW) 17 students	3 seniors majoring in English
2017.5.10	Presentation from Mie University only : Kanto District and Kansai District, Haiku poetry	U.S.A.	University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW) 7 students	3 seniors majoring in English
2017.5.19	UJI : Food and music in Spain Mie University: Traditional food and industry in Mie	Spain	Universitat Jaume I (UJI) 10 English majors	3 juniors majoring in English
2017.10.25	University of Michigan: Sports, food, religion, and superstition in Japan Mie University: Buses, railroads, conveyer belt sushi bars, and cafes in Japan	U.S.A.	University of Michigan 6 students	8 juniors majoring in English, 1 junior majoring in Information Science and 1 French exchange student majoring in English
2017.10.26	UJI: Festivals, Music and Food in Spain Mie University: Clothes, Food, and the New Year's Days in Japan	Spain	Universitat Jaume I (UJI) 8 English majors	7 freshmen majoring in English
2017.11.8	University of Michigan: Religion, costumed mascot characters in Japan Mie University: Comparison of Japanese and American senior high school students; Japanese cuisine and French cuisine; and Japanese convenience stores	U.S.A.	University of Michigan 7 students	8 juniors majoring in English, 1 junior majoring in Information Science and 1 French exchange student majoring in English
2017.12.6	University of Michigan: Japanese educational system and traditional performing arts (Noh, Kabuki, and Kyogen) Mie University: Inheritance of property, marriage issues, and popular expressions among youth in Japan	U.S.A.	University of Michigan 8 students	8 juniors majoring in English, 1 junior majoring in Information Science and 1 French exchange student majoring in English
2018.1.10	University of Michigan: Comparison of Japanese and American convenience stores and automatic vending machines Mie University: The word "mottainai", stationery, and Japanese houses	U.S.A.	University of Michigan 5 students	8 juniors majoring in English, 1 junior majoring in Information Science and 1 French exchange student majoring in English