



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers

Faculty of Social Sciences

2016

Challenges experienced by Japanese students with oral communication skills in Australian universities

Miho Yanagi

Kokusai Joho High School

Amanda Ann Baker

University of Wollongong, abaker@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Yanagi, M. & Baker, A. A. (2016). Challenges experienced by Japanese students with oral communication skills in Australian universities. *TESOL Journal*, 7 (3), 621-644.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Challenges experienced by Japanese students with oral communication skills in Australian universities

Abstract

Due to ever-increasing demands to acquire effective communicative abilities in the English language, increasing numbers of international students choose to study in Western tertiary institutions; however, they frequently encounter difficulties in performing satisfactorily in English. This study aims to identify specific challenges that Japanese students face with oral communication skills while studying in Australian universities. Results from questionnaire data collected from 33 undergraduate and postgraduate Japanese students in Australia and interview data from five TESOL postgraduate students indicate that Japanese students have greater difficulty with speaking than with listening and pronunciation. It also sheds additional insight into two areas of major concern in Japan education: inadequate practice of oral communication skills in the Japanese education system and Japanese English teachers' difficulties using English in class. The article concludes by proposing several potential solutions for improving Japanese English education based on the recommendations of Japanese postgraduate students in a TESOL program.

Keywords

challenges, universities, australian, skills, communication, oral, students, experienced, japanese

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Yanagi, M. & Baker, A. A. (2016). Challenges experienced by Japanese students with oral communication skills in Australian universities. *TESOL Journal*, 7 (3), 621-644.

Challenges Experienced by Japanese Students with Oral Communication Skills in Australian Universities

MIHO YANAGI

Kokusai Joho High School

AMANDA A. BAKER

University of Wollongong

Due to ever-increasing demands to acquire effective communicative abilities in the English language, increasing numbers of international students choose to study in Western tertiary institutions; however, they frequently encounter difficulties in performing satisfactorily in English. This study aims to identify specific challenges that Japanese students face with oral communication skills while studying in Australian universities. Results from questionnaire data collected from 33 undergraduate and postgraduate Japanese students in Australia and interview data from five TESOL postgraduate students indicate that Japanese students have greater difficulty with speaking than with listening and pronunciation. It also sheds additional insight into two areas of major concern in Japan education; that is, inadequate practice of oral communication skills in the Japanese education system and with Japanese English teachers' difficulties with using English in class. The article concludes by proposing several potential solutions for improving Japanese English education based on the recommendations of Japanese postgraduate students in a TESOL program.

Keywords: Japanese English education; English as a second language; TESOL; teacher education; oral communication; listening; speaking; pronunciation

Introduction

Successful academic achievement for international students studying in English-speaking countries is intricately tied to their English proficiency (Andrade 2006; Johnson 1988). According to Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson (2007), most international students in Australian universities experience more difficulties than Australian students due to language problems and cultural differences. Problems with oral communication (OC) skills, in particular, are highlighted as a key impediment to their excellence in academia. Campbell and Li (2008) revealed that Asian students in New Zealand found interacting with lecturers and classmates, listening to lectures and understanding instructions to be especially problematic.

The effectiveness of most international students' OC skills when studying abroad is

highly dependent on the educational backgrounds from their home countries. English teaching pedagogies in Asian countries have traditionally been insufficient in developing the OC skills of English language learners, in part due to lack of time devoted to OC-oriented activities in the classroom (Kam, 2002) and focusing instead on academic literacy skills (Sawir, 2005). Japanese learners of English (JLEs) are representative of this tradition. In fact, it seems that Japanese secondary school students face more difficulties than other age groups in formal education in enhancing OC skills as a result of the priority placed on exam-focused English pedagogy (O'Donnell, 2005; Pritchard & Maki, 2006) and the virtual replacement of OC lessons with grammar-focused lessons (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). Under this educational system, it is natural for JLEs enrolled in Australian universities to have problems adjusting to academic contexts, which require higher levels of oral performance. Determining the specific OC difficulties that JLEs experience when studying in Australian universities may therefore provide critical insight into enhancing the future of English language education and English teacher education in Japan.

Literature review

Over the past two decades, research has demonstrated several challenges encountered by second language (L2) learners with regard to their oral language proficiency, and its ultimate negative impact on their success in English-speaking universities. Ferris and Tagg (1996) surveyed 946 subject instructors across several disciplines at four U.S. higher education institutions, and found that an inability or unwillingness to 1) engage in class discussions, 2) communicate with peers who had a different first language (L1) or 3) reply to questions were the three greatest obstacles to achieving academic success. Open-ended questions further indicated that the instructors believed that L2 learners experienced difficulties in conveying their opinions fluently in class discussions and responding clearly and consistently to questions directed to them. In a subsequent study of 768 university ESL students' perspectives at three U.S. tertiary institutions, Ferris (1998) later found that ESL students regarded oral presentations, whole-class discussions and note-taking as the most difficult academic activities, whereas they regarded small-group discussions and class participation as less problematic. Participants also highlighted a lack of confidence in their English speaking and pronunciation abilities. In a final study involving 280 East Asian postgraduate students conducted by Kim (2006) in an American university, 70 participants identified leading class discussions and participating in whole-class discussions as the most difficult oral activities. Furthermore, respondents regarded formal oral presentations and listening skills as the most critical aspects for academic success.

Research conducted in Australian tertiary contexts reveal similar results. Robertson, Line, Jones, and Thomas (2000) examined both undergraduate students' and institutional staff's perspectives toward international students' learning difficulties, and found that both

groups perceived the speed of lecturers' speech as a barrier to international students' understanding. The students' responses also indicated that understanding spoken English in lectures and the Australian accent were especially challenging. A lack of confidence in oral skills was further acknowledged as problematic.

More recently, Sawir's (2005) research shed light on language difficulties that L2 English learners faced in a bridging program for Australian universities, focusing on prior learning effects in their home countries. Interview data with 12 L2 learners confirmed the impact of prior learning experiences on their ability to meet academic requirements for entering Australian universities and disadvantageous learning environments of EFL contexts. In particular, poor OC skills were attributed to grammar-focused pedagogy, teacher-centered classrooms, and insufficient exposure to authentic use of English both inside and outside the classroom.

All of the above studies identify a clear set of difficulties experienced by L2 learners with regard to their OC skills in English-speaking countries. However, much of this research is too broadly focused on international students and OC skills in general, and not on the explicit needs of language learners from specific countries. Without research focusing on the needs of a group of students from the same language background or country, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make recommendations for enhancing language education in that country, and in the case of the current study, this focus is on Japan.

However, not only is there a lack of research on the difficulties encountered by JLEs (as mentioned earlier), studies on academic experiences of pre-service Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) are also rare (Phakiti & Li, 2011). Voices from Japanese TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) majors in Australian universities can be useful because such teachers can evaluate problems that JLEs face from both students' and teachers' perspectives, based on their learning experiences in Japan and Australia; however, research has yet to be conducted in this area. Their perspectives are especially important in light of recent reform of Japan's national curriculum in April 2013, which favours a communicative approach to English language teaching and less focus on rules of grammar (Underwood, 2012).

Purpose of the present study

The present study attempts to clarify specific problems with speaking, listening and pronunciation that constrain Japanese students' academic success in Australian universities. It also aims to provide recommendations for instituting positive changes to Japanese English pedagogy by examining the voices of pre-service and experienced JTEs. With the new curriculum mandate to make English education in Japan more communicative (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2009), this knowledge is critical to the successful implementation of this curriculum; thus, the following research questions were

proposed:

1. What OC difficulties are experienced by Japanese students in Australian universities?
2. How are these difficulties related to their prior English learning in Japan?
3. Based on the Japanese TESOL students' learning experience in Australia, what changes could be implemented to Japanese English-teaching pedagogy?

Methodology

Participants

A total of 33 Japanese participants (12 male and 21 female) were recruited from 18 Australian universities. They consisted of three groups: current postgraduate TESOL students (n=5), postgraduate TESOL alumni (n=3) and undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in non-TESOL majors (n=25). The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 37. The length of stay in Australia also spread widely from one month to two years.

Instruments

The study adopted a mixed method approach involving an online questionnaire using SurveyMonkey with all 33 participants, followed by face-to-face or Skype interviews with the five former and current TESOL students who agreed to participate. The questionnaire comprised 68 closed-ended items on a 6-point Likert scale (Strongly agree, Agree, Agree a little, Disagree a little, Disagree, Strongly disagree) and five open-ended questions asking for additional comments, almost half of which were derived from items from previous questionnaire studies (Asassfeh, Al-Shaboul, Zuraiq & Alshboul, 2011; Dooley, 2010; Ferris, 1998; Johns & Johns, 1977; Liu, 2011; Nakatani, 2006; Phakiti & Li, 2011; Pritchard & Maki, 2006). All questionnaire items were presented in both English and Japanese. The semi-structured interview contained 12 questions, some of which were adapted from previous studies (Baker, 2011, 2014; Phakiti & Li, 2011; Wang & Shan, 2007), focused on gaining greater insight into the interviewees' experiences about learning in Australian universities. The interviews were conducted in Japanese after the participants completed the questionnaire and were later transcribed and translated into English. Pseudonyms were used for all interviewees.

Data analysis

The quantitative data analysis of the Likert-scale items was carried out using an analyzing tool available on SurveyMonkey, which identified the number of participants who "agreed" (whether strongly agreed, agreed or agreed a little) with a particular item.

The qualitative data analysis was carried out by identifying common ideas as expressed by the participants during the interviews and in open-ended questionnaire items.

Results

Results from the Questionnaire

This section reports on the results from the questionnaires, focusing first on 1) difficulties in OC skills in general, followed by 2) difficulties with listening, 3) difficulties with speaking, 4) difficulties with pronunciation, and 5) prior learning in high school in Japan.

Difficulties with OC skills in general

In relation to the three main OC skills (speaking, listening and pronunciation), the participants' responses indicated the most difficult general skill area was pronunciation (64%), followed by speaking (58%) and then listening (36%).

[Include Table 1 about here]

In the open-ended questions, the majority of the 16 respondents raised concerns about struggles with pronunciation, fluency and lack of vocabulary, explaining that "It is difficult to produce correct pronunciation like native-speaker", "I speak brokenly when talking about something complicated" and "I cannot accurately adopt grammar or vocabulary that I know to speaking when immediate responses are expected". Difficulties with locating the right word when speaking seemed to have a negative impact on the fluency of their speech.

Difficulties in listening

In relation to listening, respondents reported having the greatest difficulty with understanding English in whole class discussions (76%). Also reported as especially problematic were: understanding dialogue amongst peers in group discussions (70%); comprehension of lectures on unfamiliar topics (67%); note-taking (67%); lecturer's speaking speed (64%), and understanding L2 learners' speech during class (61%). However, listening to the lecturer's accent, understanding classmate's speech in pair work and understanding non-American varieties of English did not entail as much difficulty (48%, 48% and 24%, respectively), which is different than the findings of Robertson et al. (2000).

[Include Table 2 about here]

The open-ended questions revealed that seven out of 16 respondents considered Australian or other L2 speakers' strong accents as an obstacle to their listening comprehension. Six comments focused on the fast speech by native speakers, for example "I

can't keep up with the natural speed by native speakers". As reasons for causing difficulty in listening, five respondents mentioned limited vocabulary, incapability of discerning sounds that do not exist in Japanese and lack of knowledge about native pronunciation.

Difficulties in speaking

As indicated in Table 3, the most difficult speaking activity was leading group discussions and speaking in class discussions (79% for both). Similarly, speaking in class discussions without preparation (76%) and participating in large group discussions or debates (70%) also caused considerable difficulties for respondents. Specifically, respondents appeared to experience the greatest difficulties with turn-taking in group discussions, including breaking into a conversation to express opinions (79%), making a quick response to group members (67%) and taking a turn to spontaneously speak in group discussions (64%). Aside from challenges with participating in discussions, another notable difficulty was experienced in giving presentations in front of the whole class without the aid of PowerPoint slides (61%). As a reason for causing difficulty in speaking, 67% respondents pointed to a lack of command of English expressions or vocabulary. By contrast, asking a lecturer questions privately was the least difficult (24%). Communication in pairs was also much less problematic regardless of whether their partners were native or L2 speakers (45% and 33% respectively).

Almost half of the 10 written comments to the open-ended question focused on the amount of time required for their brain to first form an opinion and then compose English sentences before articulation. The other comments varied with different respondents highlighting: inadequacy of vocabulary, unfamiliarity with a conversation topic, inexperience of speaking at a natural speed and lack of confidence in speaking as some of the main issues they have with speaking. Finally, since lack of confidence in speaking and the issue of losing face is such a significant theme in Japanese English language contexts, a further analysis was conducted to compare the TESOL students' (TSs) and the Non-TESOL students' (NTSs) viewpoints. Findings revealed that the TSs were more sensitive to a sense of embarrassment about mistakes than the NTSs with 75% and 48% respectively.

[Include Table 3 about here]

Difficulties with pronunciation

Challenges with pronunciation were examined in terms of (1) whether they believed they had difficulties with specific features and (2) whether they paid attention to these features when listening or speaking. As presented in Table 4, respondents reported having the greatest difficulty in pronouncing specific sounds (61%), but most other difficulties were not

reported as particularly problematic, including speaking with English intonations (30%), making a stressed syllable in a word (21%) and stressing words in a sentence (18%). By contrast, respondents' attention to particular features in pronunciation is higher than their perception of difficulty. Sounds in words, English rhythm and intonation, and correctness of individual sounds were focused on to a greater degree when speaking (61%, 55% and 45% respectively). When listening, respondents reported relying on stressed words (45%) and intonation (42%) to facilitate comprehension of others' speech, whereas individual sounds in words and stressed syllables in words were not focused to the same extent (only 27% for both).

Six comments out of nine in response to the open-ended item focused on the respondents' struggle with pronouncing particular words correctly. One respondent mentioned his difficulty in differentiating /r/ and /l/, /th/ and /s/. Discrimination of minimal pairs, such as 'work' and 'walk' was arduous for another respondent. A third respondent highlighted that "I sometimes neglect rhythm and intonation because of excessive emphasis on individual sounds".

[Include Table 4 about here]

Prior learning in high school in Japan

As presented in Table 5, respondents were asked to report on their experience with OC. Most respondents agreed that they wanted to practice OC skills more in high school (79%), but that their sense of accomplishment in OC skills was quite low because they felt incapable of improving their speaking, pronunciation or listening skills (9%, 12% and 24% respectively). Another noteworthy result is that 76% respondents wanted their teachers to use English more frequently in their classes. Moreover, 95% students who had classes with an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) reported trying to speak with the ALT in order to practice their OC skills. Nevertheless, only 42% of students with ALT classes assessed interactions with an ALT as beneficial for developing their OC skills.

When asked for additional comments, of the 11 respondents, most mentioned the Japanese English classes' emphasis on reading and writing. Three referred to the use of self-study for improving oral skills, such as attending an English conversation class outside school. Two expressed concerns with the inadequacies of Japanese English education, writing that "I can say that how English is taught in Japan is not enough" and "There are few opportunities to speak English in Japan".

[Include Table 5 about here]

Results from the Interviews with TESOL students

The majority of the interview data with the two current TESOL students (Saki and Toshi) and the three TESOL alumni (Haruto, Hiromi and Maya) supported the questionnaire findings. For instance, participation in group discussions or whole-class discussions was regarded as one of the major difficulties they experienced. Toshi said, “In group discussions, I had difficulty in making a quick response to Australian classmates”. Maya also expressed her problem with whole-class discussions, saying “It was difficult to logically present my own ideas in the class”. The interviewees reported that correct pronunciation of individual sounds and native speakers’ fast rate of speech comprised a major obstacle to understanding spoken English.

The interview data also provided additional insight into their perceptions about their speaking skills. The interviewees highlighted low confidence, inadequate time to practice speaking and excessive attention to producing accurate speech as major weaknesses. They also argued that two major issues with Japanese English classes were the teachers’ inability to use English as the language of instruction coupled with insufficient time for OC practice in the classroom. Furthermore, an unfortunate tendency identified by both Haruto and Saki was that any student who tried to speak English in class was typically teased by their classmates. In addition, Hiromi explained that Japanese education’s lack of interest in increasing student-centered or communicative learning environments can be seen in the arrangement of desks in classrooms in Japan, in that instead of being in horseshoe/U-shape formation, they continue to use the traditional row formations.

Another insight highlighted in the interviews was that all five participants had strong opinions about potential changes that could be made in Japanese English education, especially for speaking-specific skills or strategies. They argued that it was essential to increase the amount of time that both teachers and students speak English in English classes. Some concrete suggestions were also offered, such as using authentic materials and introducing practical expressions for use in every day conversation.

Discussion

Research Question 1:

What OC difficulties are experienced by Japanese students in Australian universities?

Speaking

Judging from quantitative and qualitative data, respondents experience more difficulty with general speaking abilities than with listening or pronunciation specifically. By far, the most challenging is speaking in group or class discussions with one-on-one interactions such as pair work or private conversations with a lecturer being considerably less

problematic. This is consistent with Kim's (2006) finding that East Asian international graduate students experience considerable difficulty in leading class discussions and expressing their ideas in whole-class discussions. One of the possible factors causing this difficulty is inexperience with participating in, let alone leading discussions, before coming to Australia. This lack of opportunity hinders JLEs from becoming accustomed to expressing their own opinions, especially opposing opinions. Furthermore, it seems that JLEs' speaking performance is influenced by the degree to which participation is required. In pair work, it takes two to have a conversation, and thus both partners are typically willing to allow the other to take the time needed to respond, but in larger group configurations, the speed of interaction is frequently increased, thus permitting even less time for JLEs to gather their thoughts. As an added difficulty for larger group discussions, the respondents also reported difficulties in turn-taking effectively. Since JLEs rarely have the opportunity to participate in discussions in English in Japanese schools, they are likely unaware of how to successfully turn-take in English.

Two additional difficulties with speaking involve giving oral presentations and embarrassment about making mistakes. First, questionnaire respondents expressed considerable difficulties giving oral presentations without visual supports. In particular, the respondents highlighted giving presentations without PowerPoint or prepared notes as a particularly demanding activity, which is consistent with the findings of earlier research (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Cheng, Myles & Curtis, 2004; Ferris, 1998). Another notable finding is that a sense of embarrassment about making mistakes when speaking was much higher for the TSs (75%) than the NTSs (48%). This suggests that teachers may be more sensitive about making mistakes. One concern with this is that teachers' higher sensitivity to making mistakes might affect English classroom atmosphere. Martin (2004) claims that students' dread of making mistakes causes obsession with tiny mistakes and prevents them from engaging in language activities. In addition, research by Williams and Andrade (2008) revealed teachers' ascription to causing students' anxiety in English classrooms. That is, teachers' timidity with making mistakes and susceptibility to embarrassment would create classrooms where mistakes would not be allowed and consequently lead to their failure in improving JLEs' speaking skills.

Pronunciation

Respondents were conscious of the importance of not only correctly pronouncing individual words' sounds but also creating English rhythm and intonation. In fact, they focused on production of correct pronunciation when speaking, and at the same time, they depended on rhythm and intonation when listening so as to understand utterers' speech. This result is contradictory to Kim's (2006) finding that East Asian graduate students considered pronunciation as the least important. The evidence of respondents placing value on rhythm

and intonation is also surprising because these prosodic elements are usually not emphasized in the JLEs' reported prior learning of English in Japan. One potential reason for this finding may be that the participants have learned, as previous research has shown, that these suprasegmental features function as a significant contributor to understand a speaker's intention in an English-speaking country (see, for example, Pickering, 2001; Pickering, Hu & Baker, 2012).

Listening

Listening was considered the least problematic oral skill, which accorded with the findings by Asassfeh et al. (2011). The respondents in the current study valued self-study both in Australia and Japan, such as watching English TV and concentrating on lectures. Presumably listening skills are what respondents can improve with greater ease while immersed in an English-speaking country.

Research Question 2:

How are these difficulties related to their prior English learning in Japan?

The findings in this study elucidated the influence of prior English learning experience in Japan on respondents' difficulty with OC skills. As previously stated, most respondents highlighted insufficient OC practice and the teachers' lack of English use in the classroom as detrimental to the acquisition of their own OC skills. Also, this study revealed dissatisfaction with the amount of interaction with ALTs as confirmation of Amaki's (2008) study, which illuminated JETs' unsuccessful utilization of ALTs. These particular factors, contributing to a disadvantageous learning situation in Japan, may be the result of two major influential issues: the Japanese educational system and cultural influence.

Concerning the English education system in Japan, many researchers have already voiced their criticism, mentioning a strong emphasis on entrance examinations (Amaki, 2008; Hashimoto, 2009), lack of student-centered activities (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008), limited focus on communicative skills (Butler & Iino, 2005) and teachers' insufficient speaking skills (Amaki, 2008). One questionnaire respondent commented on this point, stating that "An ability to interpret English sentences which was learned through preparation for entrance examinations is applied to listening comprehension. ... However, considering Japanese characteristics in general, it is difficult to train students to produce English inside Japan." Another respondent noted an issue in English education in Japan, explaining that "The nature of using language, that is, communication through verbal exchange, is not taught in Japan. That's why many people still treat [using] English as something like decoding secret codes." These statements shed light on Japanese English education's apparent failure in teaching English as a communication tool, thus inhibiting the development of OC skills.

JLEs are profoundly affected by culturally-embedded attitudes toward self-expression. To take a basic example from the survey results, most students reported problems with participating in group or class discussions. Furthermore, some respondents referred to shyness and feelings of inadequacy in expressing themselves as drawbacks. These findings correspond to Koike and Tanaka's (1995, p.23) argument that culturally-constructed reticence in class, shyness and hesitation in "breaking the harmony within a group" by insisting on their opinions prevent Japanese students from expressing themselves in class.

Research Question 3:

Based on the Japanese TESOL students' learning experience in Australia, what changes could be implemented to Japanese English-teaching pedagogy?

Interviews with the current and former TESOL students suggested three changes that could be made in Japanese English classrooms. Firstly, JETs need to use English more frequently in the English classroom, as demonstrated in the following comments:

Teachers who taught me English could not speak English. I did not have a role model. Students have not encountered a situation where English is spoken between Japanese people. ... I want to be the role model for my students. (Haruto)

If teachers clearly explain in easy and simple English, ...students' [listening] skills will be improved without separating the time for using only English and only Japanese [in one class]. (Hiromi)

On this matter, in Sakui and Gaies' (1999) study, a Japanese university student also reported a desire for teachers who spoke at a suitable speed with clear English regardless of native or non-native status. This indicates that JETs need to not only improve their speaking skills but also practice using clearer English for their students. Lamie (1998, p.533) highlights the necessity of "teacher education, development and support" for improvement in English education curriculum and modification in English classrooms. As such, it would be beneficial for the Japanese English teacher education system to include specific training in interactive metadiscourse (Lee & Subtirelu, 2015) for use in the English classroom, thus equipping JETs with the oral language ability needed to guide their students through the different stages of a lesson as well as to understand and perform tasks effectively .

Secondly, increasing the amount of the time when students speak in class is crucial. Interviewees explained:

Japanese students are not used to speaking because opportunities of them speaking up are not created in class in Japan. (Toshi)

Japanese students need training in how to express their opinions to others. (Hiromi)

What is immediately apparent from these comments is that the teaching of more specific skills, such as discussion skills or turn-taking techniques, are vital, along with overall speaking skills. Furthermore, although questionnaire results showed that students reported experiencing less difficulty in pair work, more attention to performing speaking tasks in pairs, as opposed to small groups, would still be beneficial. This type of work serves to gradually develop greater oral proficiency since it requires greater talk time on behalf of both partners in pair work tasks.

Lastly, intelligibility should be further emphasized in terms of pronunciation, focusing less on producing native speaker-like segmentals and focusing more on clear communication and effective use of suprasegmentals. Attention to intelligibility can be seen in some interviewees' descriptions:

In terms of pronunciation, we do not need to speak native-like English. If we speak English following basic rules, communication is not prevented in spite of lacking native-like English. (Maya)

After studying in Australia, I feel rhythm, intonation and linking may be more important than individual sounds. (Haruto)

It is possible that interviewees' realization or acceptance of intelligibility is attributed to Australian multilingualism, which encourages people to become accustomed to different varieties of English. JLEs often pursue native-like or "perfect" English pronunciation even though successful English communication does not require native-like pronunciation. Unfortunately, this stereotyped attitude may be strengthened by JETs' sense of duty to conform to a native-speaker ideal. As argued by Tokumoto and Shibata (2011, p. 405), however, it is important to make JLEs notice that "all varieties of English have accents" so as to remove their feelings of inferiority about pronunciation.

Conclusion

To conclude, the time devoted to OC skill development in Japanese English classrooms is considerably limited for both teachers and students. However, factors such as culturally-established attitudes toward English learning and the country's educational system

hinder JETs from addressing all of the problems identified encountered by the participants in this study. Although JLEs are aware of their difficulties with English interaction and wish to overcome them, the current English teaching and learning approaches in Japan do not facilitate further development of JLEs' OC skills. This is particularly problematic in light of the government's mandate to improve the communicative abilities of JLEs. Teachers' self-improvement, therefore, can function as an influential motivator to make changes in JLEs' approach to developing their English proficiency. JETs need to implement effective measures to overcome challenges that JLEs are facing and strengthen JLEs' confidence in expressing themselves in English. In order to enable JETs to take action toward fostering not only students' but also teachers' English competence, reexamination of current teacher education practices is essential. Enhancement of both the quality and quantity of teacher education would enable JETs to enrich their oral proficiency and consequently accomplish reinforcement of JLEs' English competence.

The Authors

Miho Yanagi is an English teacher at Kokusai Joho High School in Japan. She received her MEd in TESOL at the University of Wollongong. She has a strong interest in the development of oral communication abilities of Japanese learners of English.

Amanda Baker is the Coordinator of the TESOL program at the University of Wollongong in Australia. Her research interests focus on the dynamic relationships that exist between second language (L2) teachers' knowledge, beliefs and practices, especially in the areas of L2 pronunciation, speaking and listening pedagogy.

References

- Amaki, Y. (2008). Perspectives on English education in the Japanese public school system: The views of foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs). *Educational Studies in Japan: International Yearbook*, 3(December), 53-63.
- Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 5(2), 131-154. doi: 10.1177/1475240906065589
- Asassfeh, S. M., Al-Shaboul, Y. M., Zuraiq, W., & Alshboul, S. (2011). Lending ears to EFL learners: Language difficulties. *The Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 28(1), 33-46. doi: 10.1375/aedp.28.1.33

- Baker, A. (2011). Discourse prosody and teachers' stated beliefs and practices. *TESOL Journal*, 2(3), 263-292. doi: 10.5054/tj.2011.259955
- Baker, A. (2014). Exploring teachers' knowledge of L2 pronunciation techniques: Teacher cognitions, observed classroom practices and student perceptions. *TESOL Quarterly*, 48(1), 136-163. doi: 10.1002/tesq.99
- Berman, R., & Cheng, L. (2001). English academic language skills: Perceived difficulties by undergraduate and graduate students, and their academic achievement. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4(1-2), 25-40.
- Butler, Y. G., & Iino, M. (2005). Current Japanese reforms in English language education: The 2003 "Action Plan". *Language Policy*, 4(1), 25-45. doi: 10.1007/s10993-004-6563-5
- Campbell, J., & Li, M. (2008). Asian students' voices: An empirical study of Asian students' learning experiences at a New Zealand university. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(4), 375-396. doi: 10.1177/1028315307299422
- Cheng, L., Myles, J., & Curtis, A. (2004). Targeting language support for non-native English-speaking graduate students at a Canadian university. *TESL Canada Journal*, 21(2), 50-71.
- Dooley, P. (2010). Students' perspectives of an EAP pathway program. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 9(3), 184-197. doi: 10.1016/j.jeap.2010.02.013
- Ferris, D., & Tagg, T. (1996). Academic listening/speaking tasks for ESL students: Problems, suggestions, and implications. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(2), 297-320. doi: 10.2307/3588145
- Ferris, D. (1998). Students' views of academic aural/oral skills: A comparative needs analysis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(2), 289-318. doi: 10.2307/3587606
- Gunawardena, H. & Wilson, R. (2012). *International students at university: Understanding the student experience*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang.
- Hashimoto, K. (2009). Cultivating "Japanese who can use English": Problems and contradictions in government policy. *Asian Studies Review*, 33(1), 21-42. doi: 10.1080/10357820802716166
- Johns, C. M., & Johns, T.F. (1977). Seminar discussion strategies. In A.P. Cowie & J. Heaton (Eds.), *English for academic purposes* (pp. 99-107). London: BAAL/SELMOUS.
- Johnson, P. (1988). English language proficiency and academic performance of undergraduate international students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 22(1), 164-168. doi: 10.2307/3587070
- Kam, H. W. (2002). English language teaching in East Asia today: An overview. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Education*. 22(2), 1-22. doi: 10.1080/0218879020220203
- Kikuchi, K., & Browne, C. (2009). English educational policy for high schools in Japan: Ideals vs. reality. *RELC Journal*, 40(2), 172-191. doi: 10.1177/0033688209105865

- Kim, S. (2006). Academic oral communication needs of East Asian international graduate students in non-science and non-engineering fields. *English for Specific Purposes*, 25(4), 479-489. doi: 10.1016/j.esp.2005.10.001
- Koike, I., & Tanaka, H. (1995). English in foreign language education policy in Japan: Toward the twenty-first century. *World Englishes*, 14(1), 13-25.
- Lamie, J. M. (1998). Teacher education and training in Japan. *Journal of In-Service Education*, 24(3), 515-534. doi: 10.1080/13674589800200055
- Lee, J. J., & Subtirelu, N. C. (2015). Metadiscourse in the classroom: A comparative analysis of EAP lessons and university lectures. *English for Specific Purposes*, 37(0), 52-62. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2014.06.005>
- Liu, L. (2011). An international graduate student's ESL learning experience beyond the classroom. *TESL Canada Journal*, 29(1), 77-92.
- Martin, A. (2004). The 'katakana effect' and teaching English in Japan. *English Today*, 20(1), 50-55. doi: 10.1017/S0266078404001087
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. (2009). Kutougakkou gakushuu shidouyouryou setsumei: Gaikokugohen eigohen [The course of study for senior high schools guidelines explanation: foreign languages (English)]. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/__icsFiles/afie/ldfile/2010/01/29/1282000_9.pdf.
- Nakatani, Y. (2006). Developing an oral communication strategy inventory. *The Modern Language Journal*, 90(2), 151-168. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.2006.00390.x
- Nishino, T., & Watanabe, M. (2008). Communication-oriented policies versus classroom realities in Japan. *TESOL Quarterly*, 42(1), 133-138.
- O'Donnell, K. (2005). Japanese secondary English teachers: Negotiation of educational roles in the face of curricular reform. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 18(3), 300-315. doi: 10.1080/07908310508668749
- Pickering, L. (2001). The role of tone choice in improving ITA communication in the classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(2), 233-255. doi: 10.2307/3587647
- Pickering, L., Hu, G., & Baker, A. (2012). The pragmatic function of intonation: Cueing agreement and disagreement in spoken English discourse and implications for ELT. In J. Romero-Trillo (Ed.), *Pragmatics, prosody and English language teaching* (pp. 199-218). New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Phakiti, A., & Li, L. (2011). General academic difficulties and reading and writing difficulties among Asian ESL postgraduate students in TESOL at an Australian university. *RELC Journal*, 42(3), 227-264. doi: 10.1177/0033688211421417
- Pritchard, R. M. O., & Maki, H. (2006). The changing self-perceptions of Japanese university students of English. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(2), 141-156. doi: 10.1177/1028315305283928

- Robertson, M., Line, M., Jones, S., & Thomas, S. (2000). International students, learning environments and perceptions: A case study using the Delphi technique. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19(1), 89-102. doi: 10.1080/07294360050020499
- Rosenthal, D. A., Russell, J., & Thomson, G. (2007). Social connectedness among international students at an Australian university. *Social Indicators Research*, 84(1), 71-82. doi: 10.1007/s11205-006-9075-1
- Sakui, K., & Gaies, S. J. (1999). Investigating Japanese learners' beliefs about language learning. *System*, 27(4), 473-492. doi: 10.1016/S0346-251X(99)00046-9
- Sawir, E. (2005). Language difficulties of international students in Australia: The effects of prior learning experience. *International Education Journal*, 6(5), 567-580.
- Tokumoto, M., & Shibata, M. (2011). Asian varieties of English: Attitudes towards pronunciation. *World Englishes*, 30(3), 392-408. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-971X.2011.01710.x
- Underwood, P. R. (2012). Teacher beliefs and intentions regarding the instruction of English grammar under national curriculum reforms: A theory of planned behaviour perspective. *Teaching and teacher education*, 28(6), 911-925. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.04.004>
- Wang, T., & Shan, X. (2007). *A qualitative study on Chinese postgraduate students' learning experiences in Australia*, Conference papers of 2006 AARE (Australian Association for Research in Education) International Educational Research Conference, Adelaide, Australia, 27-30 November, 2006. Retrieved from <http://publications.aare.edu.au/06pap/wan06121.pdf>
- Williams, K. E., & Andrade, M. R. (2008). Foreign language learning anxiety in Japanese EFL university classes: Causes, coping, and locus of control. *Electric Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 5(2), 181-191. Retrieved from <http://e-flt.nus.edu.sg/v5n22008/williams.pdf>

Table 1. Difficulties with OC skills in general

Difficulty	% of Agree
I have the most difficulty in “correct” pronunciation.	64
I have the most difficulty in speaking.	58
I have the most difficulty in listening.	36

Table 2. Difficulties in listening

Difficulty	% of Agree
I have difficulty in understanding what my classmates say in whole class discussions.	76
I have difficulty in understanding what my classmates say in group discussions (group = 3-5 students).	70
I have difficulty in understanding lecturers because I am unfamiliar with the topics.	67
I have difficulty in taking notes because I can't finish writing down sentences or key words before the lecturer moves on to the next point.	67
I have difficulty in understanding lecturers because of their speaking speed.	64
I have difficulty in understanding what my classmates say during class if they are from other first language backgrounds (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, Arabic).	61
I have difficulty in understanding English on video clips in the class.	58
I have difficulty in understanding what the speakers say without repetition.	52
I have difficulty in understanding lecturers because of their loudness (e.g., is too quiet).	52
I have difficulty in understanding lecturers because of their accent.	48
I have difficulty in understanding what my classmate says in pair work.	48
I have difficulty in understanding Australian English.	39
I do not take notes because it prevents me from listening to the lecture.	27
I have difficulty in understanding English that is different from American English because I mainly learned American English in Japan.	24
I have difficulty in recognizing if a sentence is a question or not.	15

Table 3. Difficulties in speaking

Difficulty	% of Agree
I have difficulty in leading group discussions.	79
I have difficulty in speaking in class discussions.	79
I have difficulty in breaking into a conversation to say related comments when somebody else is talking or has finished talking.	79
Without prior preparation, I have difficulty in speaking in class discussions (i.e., when I am unexpectedly picked to speak by a lecturer or by another student).	76
I have difficulty in expressing my ideas in large group discussions or in debates (large group = 6-8 students).	70
I have difficulty in responding to other people immediately in group discussions because it takes me time to interpret what people say and then decide what to say.	67
I have difficulty in speaking because my English expressions are limited (i.e., I don't know how to say it in English).	67
I have difficulty in taking my turn to speak in group discussions unless someone asks me about my opinions.	64
I have difficulty in asking a lecturer questions in front of the whole class during a lecture.	64
I have difficulty in giving presentations in front of the whole class without PowerPoint.	61
I have difficulty in maintaining speaking (i.e., I don't know what words I should use to maintain my turn when speaking).	61
I have difficulty in talking with other students in group discussions during class.	58
I have difficulty in starting group or pair discussions (i.e., being the first to speak).	58
I have difficulty in speaking because I would feel embarrassed if I made a mistake.	55
I have difficulty in giving presentations in front of the whole class without detailed notes or entire scripts.	52
I have more difficulty in speaking fluently than accurately.	48
I have more difficulty in speaking accurately than fluently.	45
I have difficulty in being understood when working in pairs with people from English speaking countries (e.g., Australia).	45
I have difficulty in asking a speaker to repeat what he/she has said because I'm embarrassed (i.e., I just guess what he/she has said).	39

I have difficulty in being understood when working in pairs with a person from non-English speaking countries.	33
I have difficulty in going to lecturers' offices to ask them questions.	24
I have difficulty in asking a lecturer questions privately (e.g., before, during, or after class).	24

Table 4. Difficulties with pronunciation

Difficulty	% of Agree
I have difficulty in pronouncing specific sounds (e.g., /th/ in mo <u>th</u> er or /l/ in <u>l</u> ight).	61
I pay attention to sounds in words the most when I talk .	61
I pay attention to producing English rhythm and intonation the most when I talk .	55
I pay attention to the “correctness” of individual sounds in words rather than to the rhythm of my English when I talk . (Rhythm refers to the timing of stressed words in speech. E.g., “I’ve been <u>living</u> with my <u>host</u> family for <u>six</u> months.”).	45
I pay attention to stressed words in a sentence when I listen to other people talk to help me understand what they are saying (example of stressed words: “I have been in <u>Australia</u> for <u>three</u> years.”).	45
I pay attention to intonations in a sentence when I listen to other people talk. (Intonation refers to rising and falling tones. E.g., “I went to Melbourne (↗), Tasmania (↗) and Cairns (↘) during the holiday (↘). It was fun (↘).”)	42
I pay attention to rhythm and intonation the most when I listen to other people talk.	39
I have difficulty in speaking with English intonations (e.g., using rising and falling tones).	30
I pay attention to the sounds in words (e.g., vowels and consonants) the most when I listen to other people talk.	27
I pay attention to the stressed syllables in words when I listen to other people talk (e.g., <u>idea</u> , <u>banana</u>).	27
I have difficulty in speaking with the correct stressed syllable in a word (e.g., <u>idea</u> , <u>banana</u>).	21
I have difficulty in stressing words that I want to emphasize most in a sentence (e.g., It is <u>my</u> decision to come to Australia, <u>not</u> my parents!).	18
I feel embarrassed when I use English rhythm and intonation.	9

Table 5. Prior learning in high school in Japan

Difficulty	% of Agree
When I studied in Japan, I wanted to practice oral skills more.	79
When I studied in Japan, I wanted my teachers to speak English more frequently even if it was hard for me to understand.	76
(If you had classes with an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in high school in Japan, answer the question below. If not, please choose "N/A".) When I studied in Japan, I tried to speak with ALTs more to practice oral skills.	55 ^{(95)*}
When I studied in Japan, I studied to improve my listening skills only for tests or exams.	48
When I studied in Japan, I did not know how to develop my speaking, listening and pronunciation skills.	45
When I studied in Japan, I participated in social events where I could talk with either native or non-native English speakers to improve my oral skills (e.g., local community events).	45
When I studied in Japan, I used computer-assisted learning tools (e.g., email, chat, Skype, internet radio, learning websites) for oral communication self-study in English.	45
When I studied in Japan, I had opportunities to practice oral skills outside of junior and senior high school in other types of classrooms (e.g., an English conversation school, a cram school (juku)).	42
When I studied in Japan, I studied to improve my pronunciation skills only for tests or exams.	39
When I studied in Japan, I had opportunities to practice oral skills inside the classroom.	36
When I studied in Japan, I studied to improve my speaking skills only for tests or exams.	30
(If you had classes with an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in high school in Japan, answer the question below. If not, please choose "N/A".) When I studied in Japan, interaction with ALT in English lessons in Japan was helpful for me to develop oral skills.	24 ^{(42)*}
When I studied in Japan, I was able to improve my listening skills through English classes in schools.	24
When I studied in Japan, I was able to improve my pronunciation through English classes in schools.	12
When I studied in Japan, I was able to improve my speaking skills through English classes in schools.	9

**percentage obtained from only those who had classes with an ALT*

