

Beyond Language Teaching: Creating an Encouraging “Small Culture” among Japanese Students

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I have often heard our university students saying, “I want to practice speaking English more,” “I want to be fluent in English,” or “I have to go to English speaking country to speak English.” These statements are understandable, but, at the same time, I also question them by saying (or just thinking in my mind), “Why don’t you just speak up more in the classroom, then?” Their answers seem that they are not comfortable in doing so. That is, they have a big passion of learning, but they are not satisfied with their learning environment.

I am a study abroad adviser and I also teach several courses, including English especially for those students who are seriously planning to go study abroad in English speaking countries in their near future. When I started this English course this semester, as an intercultural training expert, I decided to apply various communication theories which might possibly make students more comfortable and responsible for encouraging each other to express themselves in the classroom. I am not an English teaching expert, and this was the best idea that I could come up with to maximize my teaching effectiveness.

This experience makes me totally agree with Dr. Aspinall’s proposition of “small culture” as a key idea to understand what is happening, and to suggest how to improve teaching efficiency, in the classrooms of Japanese universities. Based on his discussion about small culture and other significant concepts, this comment paper will discuss several specific issues for creating encouraging relationship among learners and teachers of language training at Japanese higher education level.

Shift from “English as Spoken by Native Speakers” to “Just a Communication Tool”

First of all, we need to encourage students to be free from any inferiority complex vis-à-vis “native speakers” and to take foreign language as just a tool of communication. After studying hard to get high scores on entrance examinations, students tend to try to make everything perfect based on their criteria according to “native speaker’s language.” For some students, it is more important to make a complete sentence without any grammatical error than to communicate their ideas with some serviceable phrases or words. They may think it is better to say nothing if they are not prepared to speak a beautiful complete sentence.

What are the purposes of studying English? If the goal is to be able to speak like a “native speaker,” then, who are the “native speakers?” The inferiority complex to “native speakers” is quite dominant among Japanese learners of English, and they usually do not have specific answers to these questions. In other words, if they are clear about their goal and purposes for learning English, they would be able to have an alternative perspective on English as Dr. Aspinall discussed with reference to the literature of Tsuda and Suzuki.

Examples from EU countries are encouraging. I have witnessed various conference occasions where Europeans with various national and language backgrounds communicate with each other well in English. I do not mean to generalize Europeans’ English proficiency, but, at least from my observation, their English is diverse and creative, and they know how to overcome various gaps of communication. I realized that when their communication is productive, both speakers and listeners pay attention only to the essential meaning or structure of the message and ignore superficial minor errors in grammar or pronunciation.

On the process of creating a small culture in a new classroom, it would be encouraging to students if we emphasize the essential importance and joy of communicating themselves in various ways. Students will be empowered when they recognize that language, for most of people, is just a tool for communication and it is more important to have something to communicate with the language.

“This is the Safest Place to Make Mistakes!”

Students' active participation is an essential part of effective foreign language teaching. However, Japanese students share a specific feeling or an attitude that prevents them from showing their passion directly in their classroom, which is an insecure feeling for *shasharu* attitudes. *Shasharu* is a Japanese slang verb widely used by college students when they tease their peer students. For example, they may use this term to express someone who raises hands to say opinions in the classroom discussion while other students keep silence. The use of the term implies that they should not behave differently from others and it is not “cool” to show their passion to participate. It also implies that such active participation may be taken as a self-promotional action to the teachers.

Moreover, students tend to be afraid of making mistakes, as pointed out previously, though we will not be able to learn foreign language effectively without making any mistakes. Among various occasions where we may use a non-native language, classroom is actually the safest place to make mistakes. Students usually do not realize this because the classroom is the only place where they use the language. As Dr. Aspinall points out, there is little opportunity to use English outside the classroom, and students, therefore, tend to focus on handling English “with care” by trying to follow the given texts correctly to avoid embarrassing situation in front of peer members, rather than challenging new situation.

While “small culture” emerges in a given classroom, it is critical for us to ensure that students share the belief that this is the safest place to make mistakes. They should understand that they will possibly face even more difficulties in real life situations if they do not gain enough proficiency from their experience of making mistakes in the classroom. A simple message that we can keep sending to students is “This is the safest place to make mistakes!” We should also keep encouraging and accepting *shasharu* students who try various things and ideas, even if they are a little too creative, or just beyond our expectations.

We are responsible for creating “small culture” of our classroom that encourages students to learn to communicate. University students, after studying English as a subject to survive the entrance examination, still remember the norms of behavior that were formed in their high school classroom. They

also create their own small cultures at each classroom of college courses. Therefore, we should not assume that students easily shift their mode of participation to the given learning community. Our effort to creating encouraging “small culture” will require repetitive and tolerant communication with students as individuals and a group.