

Classroom techniques for teaching EFL to deaf and hard of hearing students in Japanese universities

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Abstract

An increasing number of deaf and hard of hearing (D/HH) students are entering mainstream education at the university level in Japan. Many universities in Japan require students to take compulsory English communication as a result of English being an internationally used language. D/HH students are also required to take such courses. This poses a challenge to teachers who have little to no experience teaching EFL to D/HH students. This paper examines the anxieties that teachers face, addresses some problems that may arise during lessons, and suggests some classroom techniques that future teachers may use when preparing to teach EFL to D/HH students. The results highlight the need for small adjustments to instruction delivery and classroom management to provide an inclusive, productive learning environment for D/HH students.

Keywords: EFL, English communication, hearing impaired students, deaf education, EFL classroom techniques

Rationale

An increasing number of deaf and hard of hearing (D/HH) students are entering mainstream education at the post-secondary level across the globe (Berent and Clymer, 2007). For many of these students, compulsory English communication may be their first experience of language learning without the use of sign interpretation.

Due to the prominence of English as an international language (Berent and Clymer, 2007) many universities have introduced compulsory communicative English language courses in their curriculum, although for each university the minutia may differ (Fukuda, 2009). At Kyoto Sangyo University (KSU), all students are required to successfully complete two years of compulsory English communication courses in their first two years, or alternatively achieve a TOEIC score above 520 allowing them to test out of the course. Students are placed according to their results in an initial abridged version of the official TOEIC test at the beginning of the academic year.

It is easy to imagine that endeavoring to learn a foreign language with a hearing impairment alongside a group of hearing peers is a complex and daunting prospect on both a cognitive and social level for D/HH students. Equally, hearing students may feel some unease at being unfamiliar with having to adapt their otherwise socially and culturally acceptable behavior to account for the needs

of a D/HH student. The responsibility lies with the teacher to adjust their teaching techniques in order to ensure a comfortable, productive learning process for all students. For teachers with little to no previous experience in teaching D/HH students, this situation initially appears somewhat challenging. Naturally, many would turn to literature for advice on teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to D/HH students. Surprisingly, little is readily available, although a plethora of literature concerning deaf education is both accessible and useful to a point.

This research concerns a class of twenty first year students whose TOEIC scores placed them at the intermediate level, one of whom has a severe hearing impairment. A collection of techniques to fully include the D/HH student in the class were employed over two semesters, each one analyzed for its success, the qualitative results of which are presented here.

It is hoped that the results of this study will go some way to aiding future EFL teachers of D/HH students in adapting their methods to fully incorporate the needs of such students without detrimentally affecting the needs of their hearing classmates.

Literature Review

According to Berent and Clymer (2007) and Leeson (2006) the number of D/HH students entering mainstream degree programs is increasing around the world and such students are expected to satisfy the same English language requirements as their hearing peers, despite the obvious difficulties incurred with the absence of auditory input. There is little available on instructing deaf students in English conversation in Japan (Fukuda, 2009), despite Berent and Clymer (2007) finding needs assessments to reveal that teachers of D/HH students in non-English-speaking countries are generally not familiar with the best practices and materials. The literature that does currently exist, however, is valuable to a degree when considering different techniques to use for D/HH students in mainstream EFL education.

According to Leeson (2005) cited in Leeson (2006, p. 6) there is an unfounded belief that hearing impairments are a 'language disability' and thus, in many schools, D/HH students may apply for exemption from language lessons. It is therefore understandable why students who have previously been exempt from language learning may face a challenge when met with compulsory language courses at the university level. With both teachers and students having little to no experience of such a situation, it is natural to expect both parties to experience anxieties that, if left unaddressed, may unintentionally lead to an uncomfortable learning environment.

According to Long et al. (2007) there is a requirement for techniques and practices to assist D/HH students to interact with their classmates, in turn enhancing the learning experience for all involved.

Long et al. (ibid.) also state that currently most D/HH students are accompanied by a third party (either a sign language interpreter or a stenographer) to aid communication. Although tempting for teachers to rely heavily on said third party, Dansereau (1988) discovered that direct interaction with peers and instructors produced the most significant and lasting learning outcomes. This is supported by subsequent research from Foster et al. (1999) whose D/HH participants reported a more productive learning outcome when allowed to engage in activities with their hearing peers.

It appears that having a third party available to aid communication whilst endeavoring to maintain direct interaction with the D/HH student would provide the most optimal learning environment, yet both aspects of this come with limitations. Long et al. (ibid.) identified that the inevitable time lag between the teacher delivering information or instructions and the signing or captioning of that information often leads to D/HH students falling out of sync with information, rendering them unable or often uncomfortable with asking clarification questions. To encourage an active involvement in the lesson it is important for students to feel included in the student community, defined by Antia et al. (2002, p214) as being 'accepted and valued by the school and that...unique needs are met within the classroom'. With this in mind, some techniques must be developed to minimize the reliance on the third party and thus reduce the level of potential discomfort incurred due to the time lags in receiving information

Foster et al. (1999) identify several other factors that adversely affect inclusive instruction. These include instructors breaking visual contact during speech, tasks being performed on a screen (leading to the student having to choose between watching the instructor, the screen, or the third party), and missing out on crucial information that may occur during informal exchanges between the teacher and the class. The importance of visual learning for D/HH students is emphasized by Berent and Clymer (2007) who clearly distinguish EFL for hearing students as being modulated by socio-linguistic, motivational, and cognitive factors among others, and EFL for D/HH students as being predominantly influenced by an environmental factor. They elaborate by saying that as a result of auditory channels being impaired English is acquired largely through visual learning.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle for teachers to face is that of trying to continuously better understand the difficulties their D/HH students are met with in the EFL classroom. The research undertaken by Foster et al. (1999) suggests that to become more aware of possible accommodations instructors could monitor the success of new methods on a trial and error basis as well as invite advice and feedback from department colleagues and support services respectively.

Background

At KSU students are placed according to the score they achieved in an abridged version of the TOEIC test taken prior to the start of their first semester. The D/HH student discussed in this study (hereafter S1) was placed at intermediate level and was part of a class of twenty first year students.

A preliminary meeting with S1 revealed that they have had a hearing impairment since birth, and use a listening amplification device that allows them to hear reasonably well on a man-to-man basis. Clarity diminishes greatly with the inclusion of background noise (for example classroom chatter). Their lip-reading ability in Japanese is fairly advanced, yet the same cannot be said for English lip-reading skills due to little exposure to spoken English prior to entering university. Their previous experience with English language learning had always involved the use of a sign interpreter.

To augment S1's learning experience, two volunteer student stenographers joined the lesson each week. Their duty was to digitally transcribe all instructions and information given by the teacher when addressing the class. Support services had instructed the two volunteers not to get involved in the activities or use sign language so as to further encourage self-reliance within S1. It should be noted here that the volunteers were Japanese and were transcribing in a second language. The same two volunteers did not come each week; a group of four students seemed to rotate throughout the semester depending on their own schedules and commitments.

After each lesson, verbal feedback from both S1 and the stenographers regarding the pace and content of the lesson was obtained in addition to follow-up emails each week with S1. A weekly diary was kept outlining the techniques used and any noteworthy observations concerning their varying levels of success with both S1 and their hearing peers.

For all class members, this was their first experience of learning a foreign language alongside a D/HH student. As this is probably the case in many university level communication classes some time will be given to discussing the necessary adjustments class members were required to make to enhance their communication and interaction with S1.

Initial concerns

Prior to the commencement of the first semester several factors caused some apprehension. Concerns included the reaction of S1's hearing peers to working alongside a D/HH student and the level to which S1 would be included in activities. Equally concerns arose regarding S1's own willingness to interact with other students, and to articulate when they don't comprehend what is required of them (to either the teacher or other classmates). A preliminary meeting with S1 revealed the

student to be of a very outgoing nature, keen to learn and willing to initiate interaction with other students.

Apprehension also existed surrounding the pace of the lesson and finding a balance between allowing ample accommodation for S1 to follow with minimal struggle whilst maintaining the interest and concentration of the other class members by ensuring the pace would not be so slow as to be detrimental to their learning process.

Although hand outs and worksheets supplementary to the course textbook are an integral part of the lesson, it is possible that situations would arise where only S1 would benefit from receiving additional materials. Supplying only S1 with extra information could lead them to feel ostracized or self-conscious which would likely affect their motivation to learn. Communication with S1 confirmed that they would rather not receive additional material in class unless they felt it absolutely necessary, or unless the material was intended for all members.

With respect to the effectiveness of their hearing aid, some concerns arose regarding how much or what types of background noise would distort the quality of sound received. During the preliminary meeting it was established that man-to-man communication was the most desirable. In a communication class pair and group work are essential to developing student autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Relying solely on activities that required only two speakers at a time with the rest of the class listening, although viable, does not seem optimal for the learning process of all involved. Initial test activities with subsequent feedback from S1 would need to be undertaken in the first week of the semester to determine the viability of pair and group work.

Analysis of Techniques

Delivery of instructions and information

Although all instructions and information given by the teacher were transcribed by the volunteer stenographers, it is not always plausible to rely on this as S1's only avenue of receiving information. Several limitations occurred. Firstly, the volunteers were working in a second language which included the potential for error, unintentionally leading to misunderstanding by S1. The instructions given, although always intended to be succinct, once transcribed may exceed the space allowed by S1's computer screen upon which transcriptions appear. Thus, if S1 became confused, the ability to refer back to previous instruction would be lost. Hearing students would simply ask for repetition or confirmation, but as Long et al. (2007) found, the time lag somewhat inhibits the possibility for S1 to do so with ease.

In circumstances where S1 did require clarification, the incurred time lag often meant that an

activity had commenced. In the majority of cases S1 would confirm the task requirements with their partner or group. However, some occasions did occur whereby confirmation from the teacher was necessary. The background noise created by other groups did sometimes affect the ability to receive the repeated instructions. Asking the class to remain silent whilst instructions were repeated would lead to S1 (and indeed their group or partner) feeling self-conscious and ran the risk of negatively impacting motivation.

In addition to verbal instruction, written instruction (not including the transcriptions available) was deemed necessary. Three options became apparent: handouts explaining each activity, the use of PowerPoint projected onto a large screen at the front of the class, and the use of the large whiteboard also at the front of the class.

S1 had previously voiced unease with receiving handouts purely aimed at them. This left the option of distributing handouts to the whole class each week. Previous experience has shown this to have its own set of limitations: students tend to become very focused on the information on the sheet and not what is being said by the teacher, leading to confusion later on in the lesson. Also, color copies are not plausible when producing large quantities of handouts. Referring back to Berent and Clymer (2007), who emphasized the importance of the visual avenue for D/HH students, it would be in S1's best interest if instructions could be as visually stimulating as possible.

PowerPoint, or other similar presentation programs, although very beneficial in the language classroom, proved also to have limitations. As with the transcription process, instructions and information were limited to the size of the slide. Ideally, all information would be displayed on one slide and would remain on display for the duration of the activity. This was not always possible as the teacher often needed to switch between slides to reconfirm previous information, often leading to confusion.

The use of the whiteboard proved the most reliable form of written instruction. This was due to the available space and also the ability to quickly correct teacher errors or adjust information as per the class requirements. The teacher had more control over adjusting the information to fit the needs of the class that may not have been anticipated prior to the lesson during the planning stages. In addition to the whiteboard, the use of a notebook solely for the teacher and S1 was implemented to augment the directions given. The left hand page contained a copy of the activity instructions on the whiteboard, and the right hand page was left blank for communication between the teacher and S1 pertinent to the activity being undertaken at the time. Any questions, concerns, or clarifications that initially couldn't be communicated verbally were subsequently addressed through written communication on the right hand page, although every effort was made to handle issues verbally before conceding to the option of writing.

Visual learning

Keeping in mind Berent and Clymer's (2007) emphasis on the importance of visual learning for D/HH students, efforts were made to take full advantage of this avenue. Once it had been established that the best form of instruction and information delivery was a combined use of the whiteboard and a notebook, the next step was to ensure that the information was visually accessible to S1. The importance of the consistent use of color cannot be underestimated when teaching D/HH students. Different aspects of the displayed information were assigned a different color at the beginning of the semester. These assignments then remained consistent throughout the duration of the course. The colors used in the notebook were replicated when transferring that information to the whiteboard. For example, activity instructions were written in black, example dialogue was written in blue, and explanations (grammatical or lexical) were written in red. This choice remained consistent within any handouts distributed to the class during the course.

Initially this use of color felt somewhat patronizing towards the student, but verbal feedback from S1 indicated that they found it useful in two aspects. The first was that they knew what to expect when the teacher switched colors, whereas their hearing peers would usually be given verbal notice – crucial information that S1 would likely miss out on (in concurrence with findings by Foster et al., 1999).

Secondly, S1 indicated that the consistent use of color helped them to more easily recall certain aspects of the lesson when completing assignments outside the classroom.

It was found that although the use of color may seem like common sense, care had to be taken to ensure consistency of use. It is reasonably easy to lose this consistency during a particularly active or heated section of the lesson, ultimately leading to confusion.

For the student to have optimal visual access to the information on the whiteboard and to any visual cues given by the teacher, having them seated at the front of the class proved best. When engaged in an activity S1 was sometimes unaware that the time allotted for the activity had ended, particularly if that activity did not involve a partner or group members. To reduce the risk of the inevitable embarrassment this may cause for S1 it proved best to have them positioned at the front of the class so their line of sight for both the teacher and the whiteboard was mostly uninterrupted. Given the propensity for students to be generally averse to sitting at the front of class enough space was available for the stenographers to set up their equipment without it becoming an obstruction. A limitation that occurred was that during activities requiring elicitation of answers from the class, any verbal input offered by students sitting behind S1 (out of their line of sight) was not received, leading S1 to experience gaps in information. This could be somewhat overcome by the teacher repeating the information or writing it on the whiteboard. To maintain S1's sense of belonging to the

class community and enhance their inclusion in the class dynamic (in line with Long et al., 2007) any banter that occurred during class activities was repeated verbally by the teacher.

Consistency of language use

One limitation of writing instructions on the whiteboard is the time it takes to do so. To combat this, some instructions and regularly used phrases were simplified in the first week and used consistently over the academic year. For example “speak for five minutes with your partner” was reduced to “Pair: speak: 5 mins”, or “make a group of four and discuss for ten minutes” was reduced to “Group (4): discuss: 10 mins”. Regularly used instructions such as “stop”, “switch”, and “start” remained on the whiteboard throughout the lesson and were pointed to when required. Care was taken to be consistent with the choice of language between the notebook used and the whiteboard, and also from week to week. For example “pair” was not interchanged with “partner”, and “group” was chosen over “team”.

A skeleton lesson plan was written on the whiteboard each lesson, indicating group, pair, or solo activities, the time allotted for each activity, the relevant page numbers of the textbook, and the activity type (for example grammar or discussion exercises). This gave S1 a chance to familiarize themselves with the sections of the unit that would be covered that lesson and to prepare themselves for group and pair work. Each time an activity was completed, it would be erased from the board to allow S1 to follow the flow of the lesson.

Interaction with class members

After conducting test activities in the first week it was apparent that pair and group work was not problematic with regard to background chatter adversely affecting the performance of S1’s hearing device. Pair and group activities were thus possible with necessary adjustments to the style of instruction delivery and also with close monitoring of interaction between S1 and their classmates.

During pair and group work, it was found that allowing S1 to remain near the front of the class and encouraging group members to move to this area was best. This arrangement permitted S1 to easily access any extra information (verbally given during an activity) by having both the teacher and the transcriptions close by.

Partners and group members were instructed to write down their interactions prior to verbalizing them, providing S1 an opportunity to confirm comprehension and maintain participation. This presented several drawbacks, an obvious one being the effect on time management. So as to ensure all groups completed an activity at the same time, without needing to modify the quantity of content for S1’s group, all students were asked to make initial notes regarding what they intended to say. This

went some way towards reducing the amount of time required for S1's group to write down all utterances during an activity, although inevitably this was necessary on some occasions. On some occasions S1 brought a magnetic writing/drawing board to the lesson to replace writing on notepaper, which proved quite popular with all students.

Secondly, it was often a challenge for S1 to follow who was speaking or who was being addressed; students would often begin speaking before S1 had finished processing the written information. To combat this, group members were instructed to confirm S1 had processed all written information. To further aid S1's ability to follow the conversation, addressees were instructed to maintain eye contact with the speaker, and speakers were instructed to raise their hand at the beginning of their turn. These modifications aided S1's ability to follow the course of the discussion and to recognize appropriate times to begin their own turn.

A third problem that quickly developed was students' tendency to rely on either writing or speaking during an activity. It was observed that groups would often ultimately rely more on either writing or speaking, without blending the two, the latter unintentionally ostracizing S1. Although it is understandable why this would occur, continuous monitoring of the group was necessary in the first half of the first semester to ensure an inclusive dynamic was met.

Verbal feedback from S1 revealed that although using both written and verbal avenues during a speaking activity provided its own challenges as outlined above, this was preferred over removing the written aspect as it did serve to clarify and confirm comprehension.

As the first semester progressed it was observed that some students were naturally more comfortable interacting with S1 than others. Although tempting to continuously pair or group S1 with the same more confident members, it was assumed this would be detrimental to the learning of all involved. While progression in English communication skills was the priority objective, this situation highlighted that communication takes a variety of different forms and hence presents a diverse array of challenges such as learning how to communicate with D/HH members of society. With this in mind, group members were routinely switched throughout each lesson in the hopes of going some way to reduce insecurities and apprehension and to further develop an inclusive class dynamic over the academic year.

For students to better understand S1's impairment, some lessons included a "language exchange" component that was inspired by a spontaneous exchange between S1 and another student. During a question and answer section of a solo presentation S1 had given as part of the curriculum, a student enquired into the sign language S1 had inadvertently used within their presentation. This sparked a plethora of questions from other students asking S1 to translate certain regularly used greetings. In subsequent lessons students continued to enquire about sign language. This was encouraged

(although not enforced) as it had a positive impact on S1's inclusion in the class dynamic, and on the diffusion of nervousness others felt when interacting with S1. Future EFL teachers of D/HH students could consider involving this informal language exchange due to the positive impact it had on the atmosphere of acceptance among the class.

Follow-ups and feedback

S1 was offered a choice of monthly, bi-monthly, or weekly on-campus meetings outside the class to allow time to address concerns or queries regarding the lesson content and to receive feedback on teaching methods used each week. As they had stated prior to the commencement of the course that this was their first experience speaking in English, some time was also offered for them to practice what they had learnt in a man-to-man setting. Despite initial interest, schedule clashes meant feedback was limited to weekly emails conducted in English. Support services were available should misunderstanding occur, although it transpired that these were not required.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that when teaching EFL to D/HH students, extra time must be spent on planning the setup of activities and their delivery, with particular attention given to the need for an emphasis on visual learning. The addition of a written component during speaking activities did not prove detrimental to the learning process of S1's hearing peers, nor did the slower pace caused by the need to have all instructions and explanations written on the whiteboard. Indeed, students seemed to prefer this additional means of accessing what was required of them.

Familiarity breeds acceptance. Fostering a learning environment allowing class members to transcend their initial anxieties surrounding interacting with a D/HH student is essential to creating an all-inclusive classroom dynamic. To enhance this, if D/HH students are comfortable with participating in a "language exchange" component of the lesson, this should be encouraged so as to help their hearing peers better understand their impairment.

Consistent monitoring of group interactions, the immediate addressing of behavior deemed detrimental to the inclusion of the D/HH student, noting observations of the varied success of new or adapted methods, and maintaining a regular discourse with the D/HH student and support services to obtain valuable feedback are all imperative for the ongoing improvement of teaching techniques. English language learning in mainstream education can and should be accessible for D/HH students, despite the initial challenges this may present.

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日本の聴力障害の生徒を持つ英語講師の為の 授業で使えるテクニック

スミス エレノア

要 旨

近年、大学進学を志望する聴力障害者の数が増加している。英語は国際言語であるという観点から、多くの日本の大学において、英語コミュニケーションは必修科目となっている。聴力障害を持つ学生も例外なく英語コミュニケーションクラスを受講することが必要とされている。

本論の目的は、聴力障害を持つ学生を指導した経験がない教師が直面する不安を考察し、聴力障害を持つ学生を指導する際に使用できるクラスルームテクニックを提案することである。教師が指導方法を工夫することにより、聴力障害を持つ学生にも安定した授業を提供することが可能である。

キーワード：EFL, 英語コミュニケーション, 聴力障害をもつ学生, 聴力障害者教育, EFL クラスルーム
テクニック