

Japanese School Education: Problems Which May Lead to Low Expectancy in the EFL Classroom

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Introduction

Nowadays, many researchers and teachers in the foreign/second language (L2) learning field recognize problems of demotivated learners in the EFL classrooms of Japanese secondary schools and universities (e.g., Kikuchi, 2009; Nakata, 1999; Kobayashi, 2001). Considering the learners' educational background, the sources of their demotivation appear to be associated with the school education they have received in the past. In other words, their low expectations of success (hereafter, expectancy) in English classrooms are likely to be related to their demotivation; this low expectancy seems to be created, at least partly, through the school education they have experienced. In this paper, Japanese school education will be discussed in order to examine how and why it has generated low levels of expectancy and motivation among many students in English classrooms in colleges or universities.

In order to understand the English learning environment in Japan which seems to alienate the students so much, it is first necessary to take a look at the school education system and the educational culture in Japan, and to look at why they appear to be producing such disaffected students. The following section, apart from concluding section, is divided into two parts. The first considers the influence of university entrance examinations on the school curriculum and on students, in connection with the strong governmental control on the curriculum. In the second, exam-oriented EFL instruction at secondary school level is examined in relation to discovering how and why low expectancy is created.

The impact of the university entrance examination and governmental control on Japanese school education

In Japan, there are six years of elementary school (for 6- to 11-year-olds) and three years of lower secondary school (for 12- to 14-year-olds). These are compulsory. After this, most students go on to upper secondary school. According to government statistics, the proportion of lower secondary school graduates who enrolled in upper secondary schools between 2006 and 2009 was over 97%

(Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2010; henceforward, the MEXT, its official abbreviation). The transition to upper secondary schools, as well as to colleges or universities, is determined by entrance examinations. In 2009, 53.9% of secondary school graduates enrolled in either two-year colleges or four-year universities. This rate is getting higher every year (ibid.) and is one of the highest rates in all the developed countries. According to Takahashi (2004), if the figures for returnees — adult students who return to study in colleges or universities — are discounted, the rate is the highest in the industrialised world.

The high rate reflects one of the country's priorities; ensuring that Japan is an education-oriented society. This cultural priority is supported by an exam-oriented school system and social culture, including the system (or customs) of Japanese corporations when recruiting and setting salaries.¹ Secondary school education in Japan has been criticised for being over-oriented towards passing entrance examinations, first for upper secondary school and eventually university. By concentrating on success in the entrance examinations, in particular in the university tests, the classes are said to be teacher-centred and text-obsessed with the purpose of transmitting huge amounts of dry, fact-oriented information merely for the sake of passing examinations.

It should be noted here that *on the surface* this situation appears to have changed as a result of recent educational reforms. According to Sasaki (2008), from 1990 to the present, Japanese education has experienced a distinctively stressful period due to new educational reforms which responded to public opposition to the results of previous educational policies. These issues included the exam-oriented classes discussed above, as well as other problems, such as “juvenile delinquency, bullying and dropping-out” (ibid: 73). However, despite the reforms, the classroom environment is still basically the same and therefore the classroom problem appears not to be solved or alleviated (see next section for details).

Previous research has found that the dominating features in Japanese secondary school education bring a climate of obsession to the entrance examinations. In the lower secondary schools, education is gradually guided into preparing students for the upper secondary school entrance examinations. Similarly, most academic upper secondary schools insist on an even more intense focus in preparing students for the university entrance examinations. In these schools, the curriculum and teaching methods tend to address only the entrance examinations. Leestma et al. (1987) describe the typical teaching styles in Japanese secondary schools as follows:

Instruction in most subjects is teacher-centered and takes place in a straightforward manner, usually through lectures and use of the chalkboard. Students are frequently called on for answers and recitation. They stand to respond (p. 34) ... Student questions or challenges are uncommon and not encouraged (p. 43).

More recently, Fukuzawa (1998) identified the negative characteristics of the upper secondary school education as “a text-centered, lecture format geared to transmitting information necessary for university entrance exams” (p. 295) ... “intense, fact-filled and routinized” (p. 300).

This criticism applies to secondary school classes in general throughout the country, because the entire course of secondary school education and also of that in elementary schools is firmly controlled by the government, which claims the importance of *equality* in education.

In this sense, the MEXT appears to encourage teacher-centred and exam-oriented classes. In fact, the excessive control over the curriculum has been criticised for causing the rigid, uniform and exam-centred nature of school education (e.g., Wray, 1999). In particular, all secondary school textbooks must be approved by the MEXT. This means that the textbooks adhere to the course of study issued by the MEXT, which teachers should follow in every detail. In this environment, there is no doubt that the classes are too rigid and monolithic and therefore it is difficult for teachers to create their own ways of teaching, adapted to their students. In other words, teachers are too preoccupied to pay attention to individual students because they have to cover the entire content of the textbook, which contains a considerable amount of information. Shimahara (1992: 9–10) describes the governmental control as follows:

[The Ministry of Education] carefully monitors the curricula at all levels throughout the nation, and it requires that textbooks comply with the ministry’s course of study ... the ministry expects every Japanese teacher to follow the course of study irrespective of local differences and preferences ...

Consequently, many students have difficulty in keeping up with the steady rate of progress through the content in class and are sometimes left behind. Once this happens, the academic content which they have to master increases very quickly and they eventually give up, feeling that the whole subject is too difficult to understand.

It is almost natural that such low achievers have low expectancy of their own performance in class. For the purpose of conveying how low achievers usually feel in secondary school classes, I can quote the words from a student (Ken: 18 year-old) in my class, which gives a clear insight into their state of mind:

“There are always three groups in class. One is the *able student* group made up of high achievers, another is the *unable student* group made up of low achievers, and the third is the *between student* group who try to be *able students* and always try to stay with *able students* to learn something from them. *Unable students* never talk to *able students* about academic subjects. So, I never talked to *able students* in certain classes which I don’t like, such as English” (Ken; Please note that the

student's name has been changed to keep his anonymity; and this quotation is drawn from data of my doctoral dissertation; see Tatsumoto, 2011 for more details)

This statement seems to typify the low expectancy of unable/weak students and their feelings in class. Weak students can be easily identified by their class-mates and they admit to themselves that they are not able to do well. For this reason, they do not want to talk to able students because they do not want to be looked down on and/or they think that it is useless to ask questions of able students, due to their *self-determined* low expectancy. This means that they believe it is impossible to be high achievers and understand the responses of the able students.

The number of weak students is noticeable and it has become a social problem. Such students have been called 'ochikobore', a term which has become common (Tsuneyoshi, 2004). Needless to say, among weak students the motivation to study can be very low. In summary, low ability leads to low expectancy and it generates low motivation.

The problems which may lead to low expectancy in the EFL classroom

To aggravate the difficult situation in which these students find themselves, English is one of the most important academic subjects for them because it is one of the main subjects in the entrance examinations. The importance of the English language is exemplified in the figures for the National Center Test for University Admissions. All students who want to enter a national university take this test, and so do growing numbers of applicants seeking places in private universities.² Of all the subjects in the exam, English attracts the most candidates every year. In 2010, 98.4% of all test-takers (512,451 out of 520,600 test-takers) took the English test (NCUEE, National Center for University Entrance Examinations, 2010). Therefore, the unpleasant situation for *weak students* in the English class is aggravated and their expectancy must be extremely low. It may be useful at this point to look at the way in which English classes are typically conducted, in order to clearly understand where the students' low levels of expectancy come from.

A typical English class mainly uses the grammar-translation method. One of the main reasons for adopting this approach is that the entrance examinations very often test the translation of texts. In addition, the teaching focuses mainly on the memorisation of grammar rules, drills for vocabulary and idiomatic phrases, because these appear frequently in the examinations. The classes are mostly routinized, and the language used in class, by both teachers and students, is almost always Japanese. Teachers often play recorded tapes of text so that students can learn English pronunciation. Students are often called on to read texts aloud in front of their class-mates. They are usually expected to prepare for the class by translating a text from English to Japanese. In class, they are asked to present their translation. Then, the teacher demonstrates his/her translation as a model, correcting the

students' translations. Questions from students are usually neither welcomed nor encouraged. In classes at lower secondary level, teachers often explain and/or illustrate grammatical rules. However, at upper secondary level, such illustrations are greatly reduced and the focus is much more on drills and memorisation. This is because there is much more content to cover in the higher classes and the content itself is also much more difficult.

Many researchers have pointed out the problems with the teaching method described above (e.g., Sakui and Gaies, 1999; Kobayashi, 2001). Fukuzawa (1998: 298-299), too, describes a typical English class in a Japanese lower secondary school as follows:

When Okabe-sensei [the teacher] walks into the class a few minutes after the bell has rung, the class slowly quiets down for the opening greeting. A student calls out "Stand up!" and the students rise. "Attention!" he calls, and most students stand straight without talking. "Nakamura, be quiet!" Okabe-sensei reprimands one boy. "Bow!" says the voice. Everyone bows and sits down. As the noise subsides, Okabe-sensei says, "Now take out your textbooks and turn to page 14. Today we will begin Lesson 4. This lesson deals with comparatives and superlatives. In Japanese we use *motto* (more) and *ichiban* (the most) plus an adjective to express such differences. Please look at the key sentence at the bottom of the page. 'I am smaller than a whale,'" he reads. He translates the sentence into Japanese and explains the basic rule for forming English comparatives. "In English you add '-er' to some adjectives to form the comparative. Now let's listen to the tape." He plays the tape recorder, and the students repeat the new words and the six sentences of text after the tape recorder as a group.

At the end of the tape he asks who has looked up the meaning of the words for this lesson. "Have you done your lesson preparation? Nakamura, what does 'ocean' mean?" The boy quickly turns around to face the front. "You don't know? I thought so. You'd better prepare next time. Kubo, what about you?" This student is unable to answer either. "Sasaki," he says, calling on a better student to get the answer. This goes on until the new vocabulary words have been defined. He puts them on the board. He puts up the key sentence. Under it he writes "S be (verb) + er than (noun)" and gives a Japanese translation.

"I want you to memorize this sentence." He repeats the sentence and asks five students to stand up and read it from the book and then another two to repeat it without looking. He seems to call on the less able students to read and better students to repeat without looking. Next he reads the first sentence and calls on a student to stand and translate it. "Very good," he says of the performance and repeats the translation. The class is very quiet as students write the translation under the English in their books. He continues to call on better students to translate, correcting and supplementing their translations. All students can answer. He then asks two students to read the whole dialogue. Just as the second student begins to read the last sentence, the bell chimes the end of class. Okabe-sensei has him finish reading. The students stand, bow, and class is

dismissed.

When I ask my students about their English classes in secondary schools, they almost always complain about them. Their complaints are more or less the same, and typical sources of discontent include: being ignored by teachers when they ask questions, looked down on by teachers, taught as if they already possess much grammatical knowledge, too rapid progress through the content, in particular at upper secondary level (the content of the class proceeds so quickly that they cannot understand anything) and too many things to memorise and/or understand.

To illustrate this unprofitable classroom situation, when asked why he so hated to study English and why he still felt that he could not understand English at all although he had taken English classes for six years at secondary school, one of my students (Ken) related his experience from lower secondary school. His story was as follows:

“One English teacher from my lower secondary school was horrible and ill-natured. I hated that guy! He usually ignored me in class. One time, when he asked me a question and I was trying to find some sort of answer, he said to me, ‘I knew *someone like you* would never be able to answer questions’. I have never forgotten these words. From then, I completely stopped studying English. Now I don’t even know elementary level English, including vocabulary and grammar.” (Ken; This quotation is drawn from data of my doctoral dissertation; see Tatsumoto, 2011 for more details)

Many other students have had similar experiences with English teachers in secondary schools, such as always being ignored in class, and teachers being unwilling to answer questions or being easily upset when students ask questions.

This is not only the case among my students. Falout and Maruyama (2004), from their survey of Japanese college students’ attitudes towards English in the past (excluding their time at college), noted the importance of two factors. They report that among students with lower proficiency, the *teacher* and the *courses* (course content and pace) are among the most influential external sources of demotivation, as reported in both Likert-type and open-ended questionnaires. These researchers also found that low achievers experienced a loss of self-confidence between the time when they started learning and the present (when they were being questioned), while high achievers did not. Furthermore, for low achievers, based on a correlation result, there is a causal relationship between this past demotivation and their attitude at present. In addition, the researchers report the informers’ frustration about their former teachers as follows (p. 7):

When speaking of their former teachers, these college freshmen displayed the most emotion ... Others got on bad terms with their teachers simply because they asked questions about

English. Their reward was humiliation ... A common report: teachers responded with ridicule and blame, remarking only upon the ignorance of the questioner. Another common report: teachers responded, "First, go study it harder by yourself." ...

These reports are strikingly similar to those mentioned above, which I heard from my students. This implies two causal relationships. *Teachers* influence students' self-confidence or *expectancy*, and lowered expectancy leads to *demotivation*.

Of course, English teachers are not always forbidding, and some students have told me about teachers who were likeable. However, the classroom environment is far from satisfying, due to the conditions imposed, such as having too many things to do and no time to provide supplementary instruction (see previous section). By frequently hearing how low achieving students were treated in secondary schools, I realised why my students were showing hostility towards me or reluctance at the beginning of term.

It is possible that teachers' inconsiderate attitudes may partly be caused by the stressful environment which results from lack of time and the rigid framework which they have to follow. Takanashi and Takahashi (1988 cited in Nakata, 1999) also identify *teachers' arrogant attitudes* and the *severity of their working conditions* as among the important reasons for student demotivation. However, such attitudes easily hurt students' feelings and consequently they intensify students' low expectancy. Moreover, when teachers constantly behave in such ways, students may be 'brainwashed' into believing that learning English is a formidable task. As a result, their low achieving students have low expectancy and consequent demotivation.

It should be mentioned here that in the 1990s and 2000s the MEXT implemented a major curriculum reform in elementary to upper secondary schools, as a remedy for the above-mentioned problems in Japanese education. This involved a drastic reduction in the content of secondary school textbooks, considerable reduction of class hours in the main subjects (to make more hours available for elective subjects and a new subject called Integrated Learning) and a move towards a 5-day school week to replace the 5½-day week. However, it is widely believed that this reform did not change mainstream education (e.g., Cave, 2003) and students' attitudes towards the main subjects (e.g., English, mathematics) still exhibit low expectancy. This is because the entrance examinations still exist and the style of the tests remains the same for the vast majority of students, in particular for the applicants to the better universities. In other words, admission to universities depends on the candidates' performance in short-answer or multiple-choice examinations. These require test-taking knowledge or skills and involve an enormous amount of memorisation and translation skills in the case of the examinations in English.

Conclusion

By surveying school English education and its cultural background in Japan, I have attempted to provide readers with some idea of the English learning environment of Japanese students and their unique situation. Many EFL learners in Japan are inclined to have a low level of expectancy in English classes because they are in an unsupportive setting which leads to low levels of English proficiency. Knowing the background of the students will, I hope, help EFL teachers and/or educators to find ways of more effective teaching which motivate their students.

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Notes

- 1 Entering an elite university means, in general, being qualified after graduation to get a well-paid job or get on a 'promised course' in an elite corporation.
- 2 Increasing numbers of private universities require candidates to submit test scores for certain subjects in the Centre Examination as part of their entrance examinations.

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