

***Multigenerational ESL Classrooms in Japan:
An Exploration of the Experiences of Adult Students***

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Abstract

Japan is experiencing the benefits and problems that come with having the world's fastest aging population. With this aging process comes an increase in the demand for social and educational services by the elderly. This is fast leading to a change in the composition of classrooms at English conversational schools across the island. Increasingly, these classes are becoming more multi-generational. Kobayashi (2018) points out that many adults are now returning to eikaiwas (English conversational school) in order to prepare for TOEIC exams and other professional related tests as well as to socialize. This is especially pertinent among non-traditional learners who have more discretionary time pre and post retirement. University students, who are regarded as more traditional learners, also flock these schools in order to gain leverage in their university exams and so change the demographic characteristics of these classes. In corroboration, Takahashi (2013) illuminated the fact that adults are returning to eikaiwa institutions because of the socializing component that drives the learning experience. This research is a qualitative study that explored how adult students, ranging from 18 years old to 72 years old, viewed their experiences in a multigenerational English conversational classroom at several English schools across Japan. In these classes, faculty encouraged social interaction which complimented the learning experience. This study assessed these adult learners' perceptions of how the development of relationships among different generational cohorts affected the dynamics of the classroom and impacted the learning experience. It also examined how these relationships were encouraged or inhibited by students and faculty. The experiences of Japanese adult students were central to this study and the researcher used a qualitative, basic interpretive research method with a descriptive case study design. The results were analyzed using a thematic approach. The first theme focused on the first impressions that students had of their multigenerational classroom environment. It highlighted the perceived differences between the generational cohorts. The second theme dealt with recognizing differences and addressed how students came to grips with the differences in their classrooms and how they sought to overcome them. The final theme dealt with adapting and relationship building and looked at how students formed relationships across the generational divide. In the end the research concluded that multigenerational classrooms add to the learning experience of students and in the end age is not as big a barrier as some may claim it to be.

Keywords: Andragogy, ESL, Multigenerational classrooms, Social Constructionism, Ekaiwa, English, Japan

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Introduction

Within the last decade there has been an influx of non-traditional students attending eikaiwas across Japan (Gromik, 2017). The author argues that this may be due to increasing disposable income for older citizens, declining birth rate, increased discretionary spending and the impending Tokyo 2020 Olympics. The author highlights that approximately 32% of clients in eikaiwas across Japan can be characterized as non-traditional learners aged 40 years and older. In tandem, Gordon (2016) pointed to the three fundamental structural changes in Japanese society that continue to have a significant and direct effect on lifelong learning and increasing enrollments at eikaiwas: aging population, economic and technological changes and increasing internationalization. The author postulated that Japan's rapidly aging society, due to life expectancy and a declining birthrate, is creating a growing elderly and retired population with more time available for educational and cultural pursuits. The author predicts that by the Olympics in 2020, the proportion of elderly citizens (aged 65 years and over) will be 27% of the total Japanese population. This represents 33 million persons and so this societal change will inevitably reflect in the composition of English classes at English conversational schools across the island. Because there is an increase in older adult students returning to the classroom, the generational mix in the classroom is also changing.

Even though this research focused on adult students as a single group it is pertinent to point out that this group has often been subdivided into non-traditional and traditional students (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2015; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Jameson & Fusco, 2014). Non-traditional adult learners have different experiences and backgrounds when compared to traditional students in a classroom. They may have more complex backgrounds and different educational histories as well as wide-ranging maturity levels (Kasworm 2009). Traditional learners, who are recent graduates of universities or young working professionals, may be more accustomed to learning in a formal classroom atmosphere and may be more computer literate and technologically inclined. Yet, their life experiences may be limited due to their age. Both groups are now being combined in the same classes in the Eikaiwa classroom, in higher education settings but there is limited literature foundation that provides information on to how to teach learners in a multigenerational classroom. This is further exacerbated by the sparse literature that addresses the experiences of these adults in a multigenerational classroom, specifically Asian/Japanese adult students. This is but one of a very few researches that embeds the investigation in an ESL context.

This study addressed how adult students from three or more generational cohorts in Japan perceive their experiences in a multigenerational English conversational classroom where interaction and socialization are fundamental to the learning process. The study explored the learners' perceptions of their classmates who are both within and out of their own generational cohort. It assessed how these learners adjudged the development of inter-relationships based on age differences and generational affiliation and how these relationships affected the classroom climate and learning; how the relationships between adult students grew and evolved. How adult students perceived and interpreted their experiences in a multigenerational classroom was also fundamental to this investigation.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) When inter-relations develop among students across different generations in an ESL classroom, how do these relationships grow and evolve?
- (2) How do these inter-relations impact the students' learning experiences within the ESL classroom?
- (3) What are the students' impressions of the classroom dynamics of a multigenerational ESL classroom?

Review of Literature

Andragogy

One model of education that was useful in this study is Malcolm Knowles' model of andragogy. Andragogy is a Greek word from the root agogus that means to lead. Andra is translated as the word adult which Knowles (1980) used to define Andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn, in contrast to pedagogy as the art and science of teaching children" (p.42). Knowles (1980) proposed a "new label and a new technology" of adult learning to distinguish it from pre-adult schooling (p. 351). Merriam and Caffarella (1991) revealed that andragogy is the best known theory of adult learning even though it has caused more controversy, philosophical debate, and critical analysis than any other concept, theory or model. According to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), Knowles' perspective on andragogy is based on six main assumptions:

1. Self Concept: Adult learners are self-directed, autonomous, and independent. Knowles suggested that the classroom climate should be one of "adulthood" both physically and psychologically.
2. Readiness to Learn: Adults tend to be ready to learn what they believe they need to know.
3. Role of Experience: Repository of an adult's experience is a rich resource for learning. Adults tend to learn by drawing from their previous experiences
4. Orientation to learning: Adults learn for immediate applications rather than for future uses. Their learning orientation is problem-centered, task oriented and life focused.
5. Internal Motivation: Adults are more internally motivated than externally.
6. Need to Know: Adults need to know the value of learning and why they need to learn.

Pappas (2013) explained that in 1984 Knowles suggested four principles that should be applied to adult learning. These are:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content oriented.

Multi-generational Classrooms

Elam, Stratton, and Gibson (2007) believed that a generation can be denoted by a specific time period, shared experiences, a common history, and shared values and behavior. It is not uncommon to see an increased mixture of different generations in institutions of higher learning within the last decade. American Council on Education (2015) expressed that within the last decade, an even greater influx of non-traditional students in higher education has occurred. Kodira and Watanabe (2013) acknowledged the changing generational structure of classrooms in Japan. They pointed out however that this change is not as rapid as in other developed countries. With this recognized change in the age and generational blend in the classroom comes a recognition that the methods used to reach traditional and non-traditional students will have to be fused to ensure a worthwhile learning experience for all learners. The needs of the adult students in the multi-generational classroom along with the barriers and obstacles that adult students face have been recognized in the literature.

Authors like Dauenhauer, Steitz and Cochran, (2016) highlighted the present generational structure in the classroom, others such as (Sanchez and Kaplan, 2014; Reichenbach, Hagen-Jokela, and Sagor, 2013; Young and Seibenhener, 2018) explained teaching strategies that should be used for each generation, and yet others like (Kleinhans, Cakradhar, Muller and Waddill, 2014; Howard and Henry, 2013; Kasworm, 2015) revealed the barriers and difficulties that may be encountered by teachers and learners in these types of classrooms. Levonius (2015) explained that there are currently four generations that may be found in classrooms today with the last three being the most prevalent. These are: the Silent Generation (born mid-1920s to early 1940s), Baby Boomers (born early 1940s to early 1960s), Generation X (born early 1960s to early 1980s), and Millennials (born early 1980s to early 2000s).

One of the leading authors on multigenerational classrooms is Kasworm. This author contended that students from older generational cohort would maximize the utility of the class time to achieve the most from their interactions with faculty and peers and they tend to use the classroom as setting the stage for meaning making (Kasworm, 1990). In a later publication, Kasworm (2015) reasoned that there is not a “monolithic adult student identity” (p. 16), but that these adults bring to the classroom different experiences, beliefs and actions contributing to their student identities. Students in the multigenerational classroom view their identity as interrelated but “not necessarily embedded within their age and maturity” (p.16). Students from older generational cohorts view younger students from three different frames: academic quality, positive relationships and negative relationships (Kasworm, 2009).

Intergenerational Learning

Sanchez and Kaplan (2013) postulated multigenerational classrooms in formal higher education may constitute windows of opportunity to rethink the practice of teaching as far as they epitomize venues for triggering processes of intergenerational learning. The authors asserted that age differences among students and instructors can be framed in ways that contribute to content and interaction rich intergenerational teaching-learning process. Wright and Lee (2014) explained that intergenerational learning has been unambiguously considered a significant part of lifelong learning

and as such intergenerational learning has become an important concept as the demographics of societies continue to change.

Intergenerational learning has its distinctive feature in the consideration that it is learning produced through intergenerational relationships that are understood as social relations mainly characterized by an awareness of generational membership (Sanchez & Kaplan, 2013). The authors also believed that an awareness of existing differences and/or commonalities between generational positions may lead to intergenerational solidarity, conflict or ambivalence or to any other intergenerational arrangement, including maintenance and or transformation of previous intergenerational status quo and that any of these options is equally interesting in terms of actual learning and so none should be discarded when implementing intergenerational learning initiatives. A strong argument has been made for including generational issues when working with adults and multigenerational classrooms (Field, 2013; Pinto, 2011).

In intergenerational learning, interactions are fundamental to shaping a classroom atmosphere that is conducive to learning. This interaction may not always be positive and may not always produce the desired results. Differences in age, outlook, and experience may foster an environment where unhealthy behaviors may flourish. Gerpott, Lehmann-Willenbrock, and Voelpel (2017) contended that while there are learning differences between generations; generational differences in learning styles may be impacted and even changed by interaction in the classroom among participants.

Adult Education in Japan

Ogden (2016) highlighted that Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) takes the position that lifelong learning, or *shougai gakushuu*, encompasses not only structured learning through schooling and social education but also learning that takes place through sports, cultural activities, hobbies, recreation and volunteer activities. The author explained that educators and the general public use many different terms to refer to activities in the realm of adult education. Social education and lifelong learning are the terms most frequently used to describe adult educational activities. Rausch (2013) posited that from the late 1940s to the mid 1980s social education (*shakai kyouiku*) referred to organized educational activities for adults and young people. Ogden (2016) argued that according to MEXT, lifelong learning comprises two main aspects in Japan which include the concept to comprehensively review various systems including education in order to create a lifelong learning society and the concept of learning at all stages of life. The MEXT believes that in order to create an enriching and dynamic society in the 21st century it is vital to form a lifelong learning society in which people can freely choose learning opportunities at any time during their lives and in which proper recognition is accorded to those learning achievements. The history of contemporary adult education in Japan can be traced back to 1949 through the introduction of the Act for Adult Education (Fuwa, 2013). This law aimed to contribute to the building of a democratic Japanese society following World War II. It encouraged the establishment of adult education centers (*kouminkan*) in communities throughout Japan. Fuwa (2013) noted that the idea of lifelong education was not introduced in Japan until the 1970s. This meant that adult education was not formalized prior to the 1970s. The author opined the fact that even now in Japan, older adults returning to University or college

classrooms is a rarity, and so the country is ranked the lowest in the developing world for adults aged 40 years and over returning to formal education. The author lamented that the concept of lifelong learning in Japan has more to do with informal learning than formal learning through institutions of higher learning.

Ogden (2013) corroborated this fact by highlighting that the establishment of Lifelong Learning Councils at the national and prefectural levels across the island supported the development and promotion of lifelong learning mainly through informal measures. Ogden (2013) pointed out that the recent MEXT survey noted that the types of participation in lifelong learning were mainly music, fine arts, flower arrangement and dance and that formal learning and foreign language acquisition accounted for only 4.4% of respondents. In agreement, Rausch (2013) concluded that adult learning in formal education is still an area that is not well developed as the concept of lifelong learning in Japan has a more social education appeal. However, the author added that MEXT is working to enable older adults to pursue post secondary opportunities. The author noted that for MEXT, adult learning in Japan and the concept of lifelong learning centers on the need to create a social environment in which appropriate value is placed on learning achievement at all stages of life, regardless of whether the learning is accompanied by formal academic credentials. Yamaguchi (2014) revealed that customary entrance examinations into institutions of higher learning have deterred older adult students and the limited provision of non-degree courses at universities across the island has also served as a major deterrent and continue to inhibit the government's thrust in enhancing formal adult education initiatives on the island. One cannot negate the effects that culture has on the success of lifelong learning efforts in any country. According to Stephens (2013), lifelong learning in Japan has not been successful in so far as building a learning ethic, one that prizes learning, teaches creativity, includes everyone and is seamless primarily because of the highly stratified nature of Japanese education culture. Adult education in Japan, he stated, is clearly a low priority and of low status. The author also highlighted that businesses provide almost no support to employees to continue their education in institutions of higher learning. Ogisu-Kamiya (2013) revealed that despite the promotion of adult learning by the Japanese government, the majority of Japanese society continues to distinguish between two distinct stages in life: the learning stage prior to early adulthood and the working stage after university or high school graduation. Japanese academic career society does not lend itself to successful adult education in addition to the effects of centralized bureaucratic control of lifelong education.

Methodology

The basic interpretive qualitative approach was used as it is suitable for studying problems with an aim to understanding the meanings of individuals or groups as they identify with a social or human problem. The research design used was a descriptive case study. In this study the inductive interpretations of the students' experiences was explored through several collection media such as analyzing interviews, observations as well as artifacts within the classroom including teachers' lesson plans. This was done in order to unearth themes from which conclusions could be made. A thematic presentation of the collated data was done to categorize these meanings, interpretations and artifacts. The researcher determined what point to end the data collection phase using Lincoln and Guba (1985) theoretical guidelines which are:

“exhaustion of sources, saturation of categories, emergence of regularities and over-extension” (p. 125). The interviews were audio taped. After the interview process the data was transcribed. Subsequently, the process of coding and triangulation began. Coded data was sorted, ranked, and used to develop a thematic presentation. Microsoft OneNote and SPSS software was used to help in the coding process. Triangulation occurred by reviewing the multiple sources of data collection including journal entries from observations, the semi-structured interviews and an assessment of lesson plans from the teachers.

Analysis

Theme 1- First Impressions

One of the significant findings in this study was the anxiety that the participants felt when they realized that the classroom has students of many different ages. Students expressed apprehension over the age difference. Members from the Silent Generation were apprehensive as to how they would be treated in a classroom of Baby Boomers and Millennials. Some were concerned that they would be treated like parents or grandparents. Older adult students recognized their limited technological prowess and marvelled at how tech-savvy the younger generational cohorts were. The participants in this study stated they experienced feelings of anxiety when they realized that they were in a classroom where, at times, they were the oldest student present. Many participants expressed shock, wonder and fear when they recognized the age difference. The participants from the Silent and Baby Boomer generations expressed that besides age, technology was another factor that differentiated them from the younger students.

Theme 2- Adapting and Relationship building

Participants shared how they became more tolerant and understanding of members of different generational cohorts. Older generational cohorts credited the influence of their own children in helping them to understand younger generational cohorts. All participants also described how they nurtured members of different generations. Members from the Silent Generation and Baby Boomer Generation cohorts shared how they mentored members from Generation X and Millennials by giving advice on job and social related matters. Generation X and Millennials shared how they would help members of the older generation by showing them how to use technology, make great presentations and studying tips. This act of mutual nurturing became a major dynamic in building relationships among the different generational cohorts.

Theme 3- Impressions of the Multigenerational Classroom

The last theme dealt with the students’ impressions of their experiences in a multigenerational classroom. All participants agreed that their learning experience was richer for being in a multi-generational classroom. Generation X and Millennials revealed that they learned a lot of social skills from the Silent Generation and Baby Boomer. One theme that was constant throughout the data was that members of the younger generation learned the importance of perseverance and loyalty from members of the older generation. The older generational cohorts agreed that their technological abilities as well as their presentation skills have improved because of the influence of

Generation Xers and Millennials. All participants agreed that in the end age does not matter.

Theoretical Lens

Social Constructionism was used to guide this research. So, the construction of meaning by the participants was evident from how they integrated new experiences and content with previous knowledge to construct new meanings. Their ability to overcome their initial fear and anxiety also influenced what they learned from the members of their classes, technology and their own self-presentation.

Constructionism also relies on direct interaction with the environment. Social constructionism “refers to constructing knowledge about reality, not constructing reality itself” (Patton, 2002, p. 96). Knowledge is a constant construction and reconstruction of understanding through dialogue and interaction with the social community. People, materials and situations influence learning. Learners gain new understanding through the continual integration of new content and experiences with past knowledge and construct new meaning from the experiences. Older generational cohorts interacting with Generation Xers and Millennials helped to reconstruct their beliefs and understanding and caused them to develop relationships resulting in a good learning experience. All participants adapted to the issues that were present across the generational divide. Participants accepted the differences between generations, empathized with other members, adapted their behaviour, built relationships and engaged to mutual nurturing. This caused them to emphatically agree that they had a positive learning experience in a multi-generational classroom.

This study was also framed using the Andragogy theoretical framework. The first concept of this philosophy regarding adult learners is that as a person matures his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being (Knowles, 1980). As time progressed members of the multi-generational classroom overcame their fears and anxiety and began interacting with members from different generational cohorts. Another concept of Andragogy highlights the fact that adult learners have a rich reservoir of experiences. This reservoir of experience was evident in the mutual nurturing activities that took place between generations. Older generational cohorts would share their work and life experiences with younger generational cohorts- teaching them worthwhile life lessons, while the younger generational cohorts would help members of the older generations with technologically related problems, presentation skills and study tips. Kasworm (2003) explained that many adults bring some type of collegiate experiences into the classroom which can add to the reservoir. The concept of Andragogy addressed all adult students from the Silent Generation to the Millennials. All students gained new understanding through the continuous integration of new content and experiences with past knowledge and created new meaning from the experiences and adapted to this new meaning.

Conclusion

The study revealed that in the end age is not a delimiting factor in a multigenerational classroom but adds to a positive learning experience. Students in the multigenerational classroom will initially experience anxiety and fear because of the

age difference but they overcome these by drawing on the rich reservoir of experiences that they bring to the classroom as adult students and their continuous interaction with each other. It is also imperative that facilitators design lesson plans that allow for this constant interaction especially within the classroom. The dynamics of the multigenerational classroom will serve to challenge pre-existing perceptions that members may have of different generational cohorts. However through integration, adaptation and relationship building new experiences are forged and new understandings are developed. Of important note is the fact that nurturing becomes a stabilizing force in the development of relationships across the generations. The reservoir of experiences is harnessed by all members from across the generations to aid in the development of relationships through nurturing. In the end everyone learns from everyone. This sustains the continued development of relationships and helps to synergize the various inter-relations that may be present in a multigenerational classroom.

It is suggested that further research consider multi-ethnic ESL classrooms in Japan and how relationships develop between persons of differing ethnicity and generational affiliation in an ESL classroom.

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