

Young Ambassadors: Preparing Junior High School Students for Tokyo 2020

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Abstract

As the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics approach, the government has been attempting to make Japan more accessible to foreign visitors, and the number of incoming tourists per year has quadrupled since 2011. However, despite MEXT's promise of "nurturing English communication skills," the curriculum at secondary school level has adapted very little to meet the needs of a more globalized Japan. This is of particular concern as, based on evidence from previous events, young people are likely to make up the majority of the volunteers and support staff at the Tokyo Olympics. This paper will demonstrate aspects of a short English course for junior high school students in central Tokyo, which was designed to increase communicative ability and confidence among learners who will be at the very centre of events in the summer of 2020. I will begin by explaining the rationale behind the course, then the research and methodology used in designing the activities. I will then demonstrate some of these activities, before presenting some of the feedback from participating students. The findings of this study suggest that many young people are initially nervous about the prospect of using English with overseas visitors. However, by participating in these activities, targeted specifically towards welcoming foreign visitors to Japan, students are able to increase their confidence, interest level, and ability in using English for authentic communication.

Keywords: junior high school, English for Specific Purposes, communicative language learning

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Introduction

Following the announcement in 2013 that Tokyo would host the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics, the Japanese government set a series of targets designed to maximise the opportunity to showcase the country and its capital city to the world. These included a goal to attract 40 million overseas visitors per annum, compared to 8.35 million in 2012, the year preceding Tokyo's selection as host city. In 2017, the number of visitors reached 28.69 million, 4.66 million more than in 2012 and approximately quadruple that of six years prior (JTB, 2018), suggesting that the 40 million target is achievable.

However, a survey by the Nikkei Marketing Journal found that, while the experiences of overseas visitors were largely positive, some problems persisted. The most common complaint, making up 39% of the total, was the lack of foreign language skills among Japanese people, which, according to some respondents, made communication with local people difficult (Schreiber, 2014).

In response to such concerns, and in order to welcome the influx of foreign visitors expected during the Olympics and beyond, the government Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT) published its 'English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization' for all levels of the school system in Japan, in which it stated that, "Timed with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, in order for the full-scale development of new English education in Japan, MEXT will incrementally promote educational reform from FY2014" (MEXT, 2013). This included the goal that teachers at the junior high school level would "Nurture the [students'] ability to understand familiar topics, carry out simple information exchanges and describe familiar matters in English." This initial plan was followed by a report in 2014 by an Expert Panel on English Education, which recommended that students in junior high school "focus on the development of communication skills to convey ideas and feelings in English, rather than grammar translation" (MEXT, 2014).

In order to assess students and provide clear targets for all stakeholders, MEXT adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), adapting it for the Japanese situation to create CEFR-j (Tono, 2015). This framework is structured around a 'Can-Do' list that states specific language tasks that the learner can perform in order to reach a level. MEXT prescribed level A1 (the lowest of eight levels on the scale) as the target to be reached by the end of students' three-year junior high school career. While admitting that this target is approximately three years behind continental European school pupils (Tono, 2015, p. 3), it does provide students and teachers with a clearly defined inventory of language items that learners are expected to be able to use and understand by the time they complete compulsory education at age 15. For example:

<i>Functions/notions</i> <i>China.</i>	<i>Giving personal information</i>	<i>I am from the north of</i>
<i>Functions/notions</i>	<i>Giving personal information</i>	<i>I live in Beirut.</i>
<i>Functions/notions</i> <i>brother</i>	<i>Giving personal information</i>	<i>I have two sisters and one</i>
<i>Lexis</i> <i>breakfast.</i>	<i>Food and drink</i>	<i>I like fresh fruit for</i>

Lexis
you.
Lexis

Food and drink
Food and drink

Vegetables are good for
What kind of coffee do
you want?

However, this professed change in direction towards more communicative language learning was not borne out in a survey I carried out in 2016. When asked which of the four skills in English they felt was their strongest, out of 118 first-year high school students interviewed in Tokyo and Chiba prefecture, only nine percent answered ‘Speaking,’ compared to 45% for ‘Reading’, 33% for ‘Listening,’ and 30% for ‘Writing.’ Similarly, when asked what kind of activities they would have liked to have more practiced more during their junior high school foreign language classes, 97% of students gave responses connected to speaking, presentations, or group/pair work. These results suggest that there was a deficit in oral communication activities in many students’ junior high school courses, which, if allowed to continue, may lead to the failure of MEXT’s goal to nurture students who can “reason, make decisions or express oneself in order to solve problems by oneself,” and who can “achieve top-level English proficiency in Asia” (MEXT, 2014). Moreover, if young people are ill-prepared to converse in foreign languages, the opportunity to showcase Japan to the world during the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics may be squandered.

Pre-Course Discussion and Planning

The Board of Education (BoE) for one of the wards in Tokyo decided to investigate ways of improving its students’ communicative English skills in time for 2020. Located in the centre of the city, the residents of the ward will likely experience a high frequency of interaction with athletes, officials, journalists and spectators; therefore, the BoE aimed to develop practical skills in order to aid smooth communication, and I was asked to assist with the programme. Due to constraints of scheduling and budget, the BoE would allow one two-hour lesson per week for 10 weeks, with a maximum of 20 students per class, and would only be open to approximately 10% of the third-year (14-15-year-olds) student population on a voluntary basis (with English teachers in the respective schools able to select participants in the case of oversubscription).

Before designing the course, we assessed the students’ current level of confidence in using English. A questionnaire was designed and distributed randomly to third-year classes in four junior high schools. This questionnaire was completed in class and kept anonymous; and the students could respond in Japanese or English. There were 201 total responses. Following Dornyei’s (2003) edict that less is often more in surveys in order to avoid the “fatigue effect” among participants (p. 18), the questionnaire was kept short, consisting of just two questions. The first was a scaled response questions (students grading themselves out of 10), and the second was an open-ended question designed to encourage students to consider their attitude towards the large influx of overseas visitors to the area.

Pre-Course Survey Questions

1. How do you rate your English communication skill? (Circle ONE number)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Poor communicator Fluent

2. How do you feel about more overseas visitors coming to Japan in 2020?

For question 1, the average score was just 1.5 out of ten, with only three percent of respondents rating their English communication skill six or above, and 88% rating their skill level one or two out of ten. Clearly, this showed that the students had a marked lack of confidence in their communicative ability, which would need to be addressed in any course designed to improve their proficiency in speaking to foreign people in authentic exchanges.

For question 2, just eight percent of responses were positive and 90% of responses were negative, with two percent giving neutral or unclear answers. Some representative examples of the negative responses were:

“It’s difficult to talk with foreign people.”

“There may be misunderstandings.”

“I don’t like English.”

“I’m worried about my poor English.”

Interestingly, over 60% of negative responses pertained to the student’s own perceived shortcomings (for example, “I make too many mistakes” or “My English is very bad”), compared to just 18% of negative comments displaying any negative attitude towards overseas visitors or their behaviour (for example, “Foreigners should learn Japanese” or “Foreign people have bad manners”).

Regardless of the motivations, these survey results demonstrated an overall negative attitude towards interacting with people from other countries, and a marked lack of confidence in communicating in English; therefore, any course would need to address these issues.

English for Specific Purposes

Basturkmen (2006) states that, while general English language teaching “tends to set out from point A toward an often pretty indeterminate destination, setting sail through largely uncharted waters,” English for Specific Purposes (ESP) “aims to speed learners to a known destination” (p. 9). ESP is, of course, more commonly associated with tertiary-level classes or for adults already in employment (see, for example, Stojkovic, 2015), but many aspects of ESP appeared relevant to this situation: the course had time restraints requiring only the most important aspects of language to be covered in a short period of time (West, 1994), there was a clear real-world goal outside of the general curriculum, and the course “needed to smooth the path to entry or greater linguistic efficiency in [specific] environments” (Basturkmen, 2006, p. 17). Additionally, as with ESP for tertiary-level classes, it required needs analysis before designing the course.

Using the questionnaire results discussed above as our needs analysis, as well as interviews with the regular English teachers within the area, the course design team set an overall target for the programme:

To facilitate interaction with overseas visitors to the local area.

This goal was supported by two sub-goals:

Develop practical English skills to help smooth communication

Increase students' confidence in their own culture within a global society

Additionally, at the request of the BoE, we included three holistic goals, not specifically connected to language learning:

Students will...

- 1. Be able to explain Japanese culture confidently*
- 2. Learn about other countries and cultures*
- 3. Be able to compare cultures positively*

With these targets and parameters established, I then designed the syllabus and class activities.

Course Activities

Over the 10-week programme, the students participated in 20 different classroom activities, as well as short warm-up tasks plus homework preparation and review. Each of these activities was designed to meet the targets outlined above, and, as far as possible, to address both linguistic and holistic needs.

All activities in the course were primarily focused on speaking rather than the other three skills, but some aspects of listening, writing and reading were occasionally utilized when necessary to further the activity. The following are the three activities voted "The most useful" by the participating students in a survey at the end of the course.

It's a Kind of...

This activity was designed to develop students' facility to explain their own culture to overseas visitors. As the title suggests, it is structured around the phrase "It's a kind of..." as a means of describing a cultural item while signalling to a listener that a precise translation may not be possible.

First, students discussed their favourite kinds of Japanese culture and were encouraged to consider whether people from overseas would be aware of them. Then the teacher collated some of the ideas on the board and elicited possible English translations. The teacher then introduced the phrase "It's a kind of..." as a prefix to any explanation in cases where there is no clear English word; for example, the cooking style of *okonomiyaki* ("It's a kind of pancake with vegetables and seafood or meat inside.")

Next, the teacher showed some images of Japanese culture – for example, *yukata* – and students were asked to think of a clear explanation in pairs. The teacher elicited some ideas from the class then showed one possible description as a further example: *It's a kind of summer kimono.*

When students appeared comfortable with the task, there was then a game-style activity, in which students were divided into pairs or threes and given an identical set of cards – one per group. On each of these cards, a specific cultural item was written; for example, *puri kura*, *shitajiki*, or *White Day*. Each member of a group would take a turn to read the card and try to explain the item to their teammates using English. Students were encouraged to use gestures if necessary, just as they might if in an authentic situation in which they must explain Japanese food or culture. The team that successfully explained all of the cards to each other was the winner. (NOTE: a variation of this activity, adapted for university students, has been submitted for publication elsewhere; Davies, 2018.)

This activity met the holistic goal of being able to explain Japanese culture confidently. Additionally, it practised a practical English skill (“It’s a kind of...”) to help smooth communication, as per one of the main sub-goals. Furthermore, an observing teacher noted that the activity encouraged authentic negotiation of meaning in order for students to explain the items to each other – a vital skill in a genuine cross-cultural communication setting – as well as encouraging students to use their imaginations in order to explain, rather than searching for “one correct answer.”

Where in the World?

The *Where in the World?* activity was structured around a straightforward information gap. First, students reviewed simple prepositions of place (*in*, *near*, *next to*, etc.), then there was a quiz in which groups of three or four students raced to name five countries from each continent of the world. This was designed to introduce some of the key vocabulary for the activity, and for the Olympics themselves when students are likely to come into contact with people from a variety of nations.

Students were given three versions (at random) of a world map with some of the country names already filled in, but some spaces left blank. Then they were tasked with filling all of the blank spaces by walking around the class and speaking to different students, asking questions or explaining to each other using the prepositions. For example, “Portugal is next to Spain,” or “Is France between Spain and Germany?”

While the activity was relatively simple, students commented in the end-of-course questionnaire that, “It was fun to finish faster than my classmates,” and “I learned about some new countries.” This suggests that the activity met the course holistic goal to learn about other countries, while also providing a framework for genuine peer learning through authentic questions, negotiation of meaning, and conveyance of information. Additionally, the teacher-observer noted that by practising prepositions, students may be better equipped to answer any questions from visitors about the local area.

The Same, but Different

This activity was designed to meet the goal of developing student confidence in their own culture, while simultaneously learning about other countries and comparing cultures positively. More specifically, it aimed to reduce the levels of anxiety in meeting people from overseas, as expressed in the pre-course survey, where some students mentioned cultural differences in negative terms; for example, “Foreign people’s manners are different. It will make problems;” or “People from other countries will not understand Japan.”

First, the teacher pre-taught the words *same*, *similar* and *different* and gave some examples of comparisons between countries. For instance, “The seasons in Britain are similar to Japan. The food in Britain is different from Japan; British people eat potatoes more than rice!” Then each student was assigned a country at random. For homework, they researched about the country, with the goal of finding at least two similarities with Japan and at least one difference. In the following class, the students split into groups and each member made a one-minute speech about their country.

To encourage students to listen carefully, they all kept a notebook in which they were assigned to keep a record of their peers’ presentations, then added some of their own ideas for the *next* homework, thus reviewing their classmate’s research and expanding their knowledge of a variety of cultures.

Again, this met the target of students conveying information authentically, as well as encouraging them to consider differences and similarities more positively.

Results and Conclusions

At the end of the ten-week programme, the students were asked the same questions as before the course:

1. *How do you rate your English communication skill? (Circle ONE number)*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Poor communicator Fluent

2. *How do you feel about more overseas visitors coming to Japan in 2020?*

It should be noted that this group of students, even before the course began, showed less negativity than the wider student population towards their own English skill and the likely influx of foreign visitors. The very fact that they had joined this elective programme (with classes outside regular school hours) already suggested a higher level of motivation and interest than some of their peers. However, at the beginning of the course, the participants’ average self-evaluation of their English communication skill was 3.1 (out of 10). At the end of the course, the average score for the same question had more than doubled, to a rating of 6.3. This certainly suggests a higher level of confidence in the students’ ability to communicate effectively in their L2, and it indicates that the course met one of the two main sub-goals: *Develop practical English skills to help smooth communication*. There was initially some confusion among students regarding the lack of correction and formal testing of skills (the evaluation was based entirely on attendance and participation); however,

teacher-observers noted that this did not appear to be a problem in the latter half of the programme, with one observer noting “Most students [are] willing to take high risks,” which, according to Rees-Miller (1993), is the characteristic of a successful learner (p. 682).

In response to the second question, regarding the students’ feelings about overseas visitors coming to Japan for the Olympics and Paralympics, before the course 29% of the participants’ responses were positive, with 60% negative. At the end of the programme, conversely, 87% of responses were positive, with only 5% expressing negativity. Some example comments included: “I want to practise with real foreign people!” “I make lots of mistakes, but it’s OK!” “I’m interested in knowing more about Africa.” “I think I can explain well now.” Such responses suggest that the second sub-goal, to *Increase students’ confidence in their own culture within a global society*, had been met by many of the students. Furthermore, these comments were evidence of the holistic targets being met: to explain Japanese culture confidently, to learn about other countries, and to be able to compare cultures positively.

Admittedly, this was a small-scale programme attended only by voluntary participants. However, the change in learner attitudes towards their own English skill (double the rate at the beginning of the course), and the increase in positivity towards the influx of visitors to the local area (treble the number of positive comments received in the pre-course survey) were marked. These results suggest that, even in a comparatively short programme (a total of 20 hours’ teacher-student contact time over 10 weeks), it is possible to significantly increase learner confidence in their L2 communication skill by focusing on content rather than form and inviting students to take risks. Additionally, through activities related to real-world situations, and through guided independent and peer-learning, it is possible to increase young people’s interest in local and international cultures. These findings may be of note, not only for Japan in the approach to Tokyo 2020, but also in other situations where the number of incoming tourists is increasing significantly, and where the local people’s ability to communicate positively with people from different backgrounds may have substantial cultural and economic value.

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