

Tokoha University Students and Their Oral Communication Classes: A Second Look

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In 2010, I wrote an article for the Tokoha Gakuen University Research Review entitled, ‘Cultural Differences in the Classroom: What do Tokoha University Students Think About Their Oral Communication Classes?’ For that research, I gave ninety-four students a questionnaire to gauge their feelings about oral communication classes taught by native-English teachers. Previous studies had reported that cultural differences between Japanese students and native-English teachers could cause frustration due to differing expectations and opinions about how to run an effective class (Rockelman, 1995; Saito and Ebsworth, 2004; Simpson, 2008). Saito and Ebsworth (2004) even noted that in a study of Japanese university students, fifty-six percent said they preferred English classes taught by Japanese teachers. Two of the main reasons for this were some students felt Japanese teachers could better relate to the English learning process, and some students felt more comfortable if they could use Japanese to ask and get explanations for difficult questions (Saito and Ebsworth, 2004, p. 119).

In the spring of 2014, I was asked to take part in a presentation at Tokoha’s annual summer conference, and I decided to talk about the results of the 2010 questionnaire. In order to gather more data, I gave an almost identical questionnaire to ninety of my current students. This report will both analyze the results of the 2014 questionnaire and compare those findings with what was reported in the 2010 article.

Method for the 2014 research:

In July 2014, ninety Tokoha University students from eight different English conversation classes filled out the questionnaires (see Appendix A

for full questionnaire). Of these eight classes, five were from the English Department: two Oral Communication I classes, two Oral Communication II classes, and one Oral Communication III class. From the Global Communications Department there were two classes: one Basic English Conversation class and one English Conversation I class. The eighth class was AEP II, an advanced class that is open to students of both departments. Participants ranged from first to fourth-year students. Sixty-eight of the students were enrolled in the English Department, and the remaining twenty-two in the Global Communications Department. Students were asked not to write their names on the questionnaire, thereby assuring anonymity.

Questions 2-11 used a ten-point Likert scale, and the average score for each question was calculated. Students were also asked to write comments about what they liked and disliked about English classes taught by native-English speakers. The only difference between the 2010 and 2014 questionnaires was that in 2014 a question was added asking students to list some topics that they like to talk about in English conversation classes. In analyzing the results, participants were also divided into sub-groups (by grade, length of overseas experience, and department) to make comparisons easier. The results of the 2010 (Appendix B) and 2014 questionnaires (Appendix C) are listed separately, as well as a table showing the combined results of both questionnaires (Appendix D).

Results and Discussion:

Although an in-depth statistical analysis including standard deviation and statistical significance was not conducted, average scores were calculated for all students as well as the various sub-groups. Many trends that were noticed in the 2010 data could also be detected in the 2014 results.

For example, as in 2010, the 2014 data indicated that students were much more likely to want to share their opinions with their group partners (avg. =8.88) or teacher (avg. =8.64) than with the entire class (avg. =6.61). Students were also much more likely to ask questions to their teachers as they got older (first-year student avg. =5.88, second year =6.04, third and fourth year =7.68) and as they gained overseas experience (average of students with no overseas experience =5.71, with some experience =7.26, with ten or more weeks of experience =8.31).

In 2010, a somewhat surprising result was that first-year students were less likely (avg. =3.47) than second-year students (avg. =4.11) to think their teachers asked them questions that were too difficult. However, this result was repeated in 2014, with first-year students being the least likely of any grade to feel this way (first-year student avg. =2.73, second year =3.39, third and fourth year =3.23). Additionally, in 2010, first-year students (avg. =1.56) had been least likely to think their teachers asked them questions that were too personal. This result was also replicated in 2014 (first-year student avg. =1.18, second year =1.79, third and fourth year =1.73).

Another interesting result concerned how students felt about using textbooks in class. Neither the 2010 nor 2014 students generally preferred using textbooks, but there was a drop in the average score from 2010 (avg. =2.95) to 2014 (avg. =2.24). While this decline is not incredibly large, it was unusual in that it was consistent and almost uniform among the sub-groups. It is unclear why students do not prefer textbooks in class, and a follow-up to this is needed. Some possibilities are that students may find textbooks costly, or they may find some of the activities in them uninteresting, or perhaps they receive more homework in classes that use texts.

There were, however, some trends reported in 2010 that were not borne out in the 2014 data. For example, it was reported in 2010 that as students acquired more overseas experience, they seemed more likely to want to do activities using their imagination (average of students with no overseas experience =7.67, with some experience =8.12, with ten or more weeks of experience =8.69). However, in 2014 this tendency was not replicated and the results were virtually uniform for all three sub-groups (average of students with no overseas experience =7.88, with some experience =7.87, with ten or more weeks of experience =7.85).

Also, in 2010 it was reported that as students got older, there was a clear trend towards them wanting to debate and disagree with the opinions of others (first-year student avg. =5.63, second year =6.14, third and fourth year =7.12). However, this was not seen in the 2014 data (first-year student avg. =6.98, second year =6.69, third and fourth year =6.86).

In examining the students' written comments, the most common answers given by students for what they liked about classes taught by na-

tive-English speakers were:

- Having time to speak with both the teacher and other students in English
- Learning 'natural English' (eg. expressions, intonation, pronunciation)
- Giving opinions and ideas to the teacher and other students
- Learning about other countries and cultures

The most common complaints about the things they disliked included:

- Sometimes it was difficult to understand the native-English teachers (eg. because of talking too fast or using difficult words)
- Sometimes activities were too difficult and/or students didn't have enough time to think of answers
- Students wanted to talk with a greater variety of classmates rather than always having the same partners
- Some students complained that they didn't like to do presentations or give opinions in front of the class
- Sometimes other students spoke Japanese in class

The most common topics that students reported they liked to talk about in class were:

- Countries and world cultures
- Traveling
- Topics where I have to use my imagination
- Sports
- Current events

While it was not unexpected that many students would report wanting to talk about topics such as countries, world cultures and traveling, it was surprising how many students wrote that they wanted to talk about 'any topic where I have to use my imagination.' This provides some evidence that many students really do want to do activities where they are creative and employ their imaginations.

It must be noted that the results of these studies must be taken with caution. With such a small sample size, anomalies sometimes occur which don't make much sense on the surface. A good example can be seen when looking at the 2014 data for question #4 ('I like doing activities where I have

to share my opinions with the entire class'). The average score of the 50 second, third, and fourth-year students was 5.36, indicating that for many of these students, enthusiasm for sharing their opinions with the class is tepid at best. However, for the same question, the average score of the three classes of first-year students (forty students total) was 8.18. This is an eye-catching disparity that intuitively doesn't make much sense. However, this result can be at least partly explained by noting that these three first-year classes from the beginning all had exceptional chemistry and a large number of the students seem to genuinely enjoy interacting with one another. This demonstrates that numbers cannot always be taken at face value and a much larger sample size is needed before more definitive conclusions can be reached.

Another example can be seen in the 2014 results when students were asked to fill in what they thought was the best number of students for an oral communication class. It seems a large number of students chose a number corresponding with the number of students in their current class. For example, the average number of students in the three first-year classes was 14.33. The average of those students' answers for that question was 14.55. The average number of students in the three second-year classes was 9.0. The average of their responses was 9.22.

Another factor that may have skewed the results was this questionnaire was given to students during class time, and to match the communicative nature of the class, students were asked to discuss their answers in groups of two or three as they filled in the questionnaire. Although students were told multiple times that they could have different answers than their group members, it is certainly possible that some students were influenced by their partners' ideas when filling in the questionnaire.

While it may not be possible to draw definitive conclusions from this data, it may be useful for looking at trends and getting a general idea of what students like and dislike about their oral communication classes. Perhaps more questionnaires could be given to future classes both as a way to gather further data and to see if trends are supported over time. Osterman (2014) noted that one of the main factors affecting a student's willingness to communicate is the classroom environment. Using this information may help native-English teachers get a better sense of the opinions and expecta-

tions of their students and help them create a better learning environment.

References:

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Appendix A: 2014 Questionnaire

English Conversation Class Questionnaire

Class Name:

How long have you studied or lived in other countries?

What number of students do you think is best for an oral communication class?

1. In English conversation classes, do you prefer doing activities:

(Please choose one answer)

A. In small groups of two or three students:

B. In larger groups of four to six students:

C. Together with the entire class:

For the following questions, please circle a number:

2. I like doing activities where I have to share my opinions (意見を交換する)
with my partner(s) in small groups:

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

strongly disagree (全くそう思わない) strongly agree (本当にそう思う)

3. I like doing activities where I have to share my opinions with the teacher:

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

strongly disagree

strongly agree

4. I like doing activities where I have to share my opinions with the entire class:

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

strongly disagree

strongly agree

5. I like doing activities where I have to be creative/use my imagination (独創的で、想像力を使う):

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

strongly disagree

strongly agree

6. My native English teachers often ask me questions that are too difficult:

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

strongly disagree

strongly agree

7. My native English teachers often ask me questions that are too personal (個人的すぎる):

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

strongly disagree

strongly agree

8. I like doing activities where I can debate (討論する) and disagree (反対する) with the opinions of other students:

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

strongly disagree

strongly agree

9. If you have a question during class, do you ask the teacher?

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

never

sometimes

always

10. I prefer when a teacher uses or follows a textbook (教科書) in class:

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

strongly disagree

strongly agree

11. I am satisfied (満足している) with the English classes taught by native-English speakers:

1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

strongly disagree

strongly agree

For the following questions, please write your answers:

1. What do you like about English classes taught by native-English speakers?

2. What do you not like about English classes taught by native-English speakers?

3. What are some topics that you like to talk about in English conversation classes?

Appendix B: 2010 Questionnaire Results

Results of Question #1

Answer:	# of Students:	Percentage:
A	82	87.2%
B	9	9.6%
C	3	3.2%

Results (average scores) for other questions

	#Ss	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11
A	10.22	8.90	8.50	6.36	7.86	3.45	1.96	6.32	6.26	2.95	8.99
B	10.91	8.81	8.44	6.66	7.66	3.47	1.56	5.63	5.72	2.84	9.06
C	9.75	8.64	7.96	6.18	7.32	4.11	2.54	6.14	6.25	3.03	8.82
D	9.97	9.21	9.00	6.24	8.50	2.88	1.85	7.12	6.76	2.97	9.06
E	10.56	8.76	8.35	6.70	7.67	3.61	2.07	6.37	5.89	2.91	8.81
F	9.78	9.10	8.70	5.90	8.12	3.23	1.80	6.25	6.75	3.00	9.23
G	9.38	9.06	8.88	6.94	8.69	2.56	1.44	7.19	7.94	3.56	9.50
H	10.20	8.97	8.51	6.45	7.95	3.46	1.97	6.58	6.43	3.04	9.04
I	10.30	8.65	8.45	6.05	7.55	3.40	1.90	5.35	5.60	2.60	8.80

Key:

#Ss=Average number of students that each group thought would be best for an oral communication class

A=Average results of all students (Number of students (N) =94)

B=Average results of all 1st year students (N=32)

C=Average results of all 2nd year students (N=28)

D=Average results of all 3rd and 4th year students (N=34)

E=Average results of students with no experience studying or living overseas (N=54)

F=Average results of students with previous experience studying or living overseas (N=40)

G=Average results of students with ten weeks or more experience studying or living overseas (N=16)

H=Average results of all English Department students (N=74)

I=Average results of all Global Communications Department students (N=20)

Appendix C: 2014 Questionnaire Results

Results of Question #1

Answer:	# of Students:	Percentage:
A	71	78.9%
B	17	18.9%
C	2	2.2%

Results (average scores) for other questions

	#Ss	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11
A	12.00	8.88	8.64	6.61	7.88	3.06	1.50	6.86	6.37	2.24	9.63
B	14.55	9.18	9.18	8.18	8.23	2.73	1.18	6.98	5.88	2.18	9.75
C	9.22	8.32	7.86	5.25	7.86	3.39	1.79	6.69	6.04	2.39	9.36
D	11.00	9.05	8.68	5.50	7.27	3.23	1.73	6.86	7.68	2.18	9.77
E	12.33	8.77	8.50	6.83	7.88	3.27	1.17	6.44	5.71	2.00	9.60
F	11.58	9.03	8.84	6.32	7.87	2.76	1.94	7.42	7.26	2.58	9.68
G	12.00	9.15	8.85	6.08	7.85	2.31	2.00	7.46	8.31	1.92	9.77
H	11.78	9.01	8.79	6.63	7.72	3.09	1.43	7.04	6.47	2.09	9.69
I	12.64	8.45	8.18	6.55	8.36	2.95	1.73	6.27	6.05	2.73	9.45

Key:

#Ss=Average number of students that each group thought would be best for an oral communication class

A=Average results of all students (Number of students (N)=90)

B=Average results of all 1st year students (N=40)

C=Average results of all 2nd year students (N=28)

D=Average results of all 3rd and 4th year students (N=22)

E=Average results of students with no experience studying or living overseas (N=52)

F=Average results of students with previous experience studying or living overseas (N=38)

G=Average results of students with ten weeks or more experience studying or living overseas (N=13)

H=Average results of all English Department students (N=68)

I=Average results of all Global Communications Department students (N=22)

Appendix D: Combined Results of 2010 and 2014 Questionnaires

Results of Question #1

Answer:	# of Students:	Percentage:
A	153	83.2%
B	26	14.1%
C	5	2.7%

Results (average scores) for other questions

	#Ss	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11
A	11.08	8.89	8.57	6.48	7.87	3.26	1.73	6.58	6.31	2.60	9.30
B	12.89	9.01	8.85	7.50	7.97	3.06	1.35	6.38	5.81	2.47	9.44
C	9.49	8.48	7.91	5.71	7.59	3.75	2.16	6.41	6.14	2.38	9.09
D	10.38	9.14	8.88	5.95	8.02	3.02	1.80	7.02	7.13	2.66	9.34
E	11.40	8.76	8.42	6.76	7.77	3.44	1.63	6.41	5.80	2.46	9.20
F	10.65	9.06	8.77	6.10	8.00	3.00	1.87	6.82	7.00	2.79	9.45
G	10.56	9.10	8.86	6.55	8.31	2.45	1.69	7.31	8.10	2.83	9.62
H	10.94	8.99	8.65	6.54	7.84	3.28	1.71	6.80	6.45	2.58	9.35
I	11.52	8.55	8.31	6.31	7.98	3.17	1.81	5.83	5.83	2.67	9.14

Key:

#Ss=Average number of students that each group thought would be best for an oral communication class

A=Average results of all students (Number of students (N)=184)

B=Average results of all 1st year students (N=72)

C=Average results of all 2nd year students (N=56)

D=Average results of all 3rd and 4th year students (N=56)

E=Average results of students with no experience studying or living overseas (N=106)

F=Average results of students with previous experience studying or living overseas (N=78)

G=Average results of students with ten weeks or more experience studying or living overseas (N=29)

H=Average results of all English Department students (N=142)

I=Average results of all Global Communications Department students (N=42)